QAnon

Author(s): Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley

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Special Correspondence

QAnon: Radical Opinion versus Radical Action

by Sophia Moskalenko & Clark McCauley

Abstract

QAnon is a baseless and debunked conspiracy theory propagated through Internet social media, with bizarre beliefs that are nevertheless shared by millions of Americans. After the 1/6/2021 Capitol Hill riot, QAnon followers were identified among those breaching the Capitol Hill building, spurring comparisons with ISIS and debates about how to deradicalize QAnon followers. Using the Two-Pyramids model of radicalization in conjunction with polling data, this Research Note highlights the relatively small threat of radical action from QAnon. We argue that deradicalization efforts aimed at QAnon opinions are a waste of resources and potentially dangerous in exaggerating the QAnon threat and increasing Right-Wing perception of government over-reach.

Keywords: Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), QAnon, radical action, radical opinion, radicalization, Two-Pyramids model, United States.

On January, 6, 2021, a crowd stormed the Capitol Building in Washington, DC, intent on stopping the count of electoral votes cast in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. The Capitol breach was a watershed moment, revealing deep cultural divisions in the USA and exposing the radical means that some Americans are willing to use to advance their political views. In the days that followed, the news media scrambled to make sense of the event; articles, television broadcasts and radio interviews featured QAnon as one of the movements responsible for the Capitol invasion.

A baseless and debunked conspiracy theory, QAnon has a loose Internet-based following numbering in the millions in the U.S.[1] QAnon believers claim that a satanic cabal of pedophiles and cannibals controls world governments and the media. This cabal, QAnon claims, includes Bill and Hillary Clinton, George Soros, Tom Hanks and Lady Gaga, among others, while Donald Trump is believed to be working behind the scenes to bring it down.[2] The list of elements building up the conspiracy theory goes on and on, evolving with new facts and fiction. QAnon internet forums encourage followers to "do the research" and "connect the dots" - in other words to function as collective myth-making platforms. It is on these platforms that QAnon discussed and planned "the Storm" of January 6th, designed to regain the "stolen" presidency for Donald Trump.[3]

Given the role of QAnon in the insurrectionists' radical action, radicalization experts have weighed in, to help the public and the government to understand the threat. Some scholars of terrorism have compared QAnon to ISIS.[4; 5] Others have suggested new deradicalizing efforts to guide people out of QAnon.[6; 7]

We want to sound an alarm against categorizing QAnon as a terrorist group akin to ISIS, and to warn that efforts at deradicalization of QAnon followers are likely to do more harm than good.

Radicalization involves an increased support for one side of a political conflict.[8] For some, increased support for conflict is a matter of opinion only. For others, radicalization involves radical action in support of a political conflict, such as participation in rallies and protests, destruction of property and attacks on people.

We have proposed the Two Pyramids Model of radicalization to represent this distinction.[9] The Opinion Radicalization pyramid has four layers, with politically neutral individuals at the bottom layer. At the next level up are those who sympathize with radical action. Third level from the bottom are those who justify radical action. Finally, at the apex of the pyramid are those who consider radical action a personal moral obligation.

Figure 1: Radicalization in Opinion Pyramid
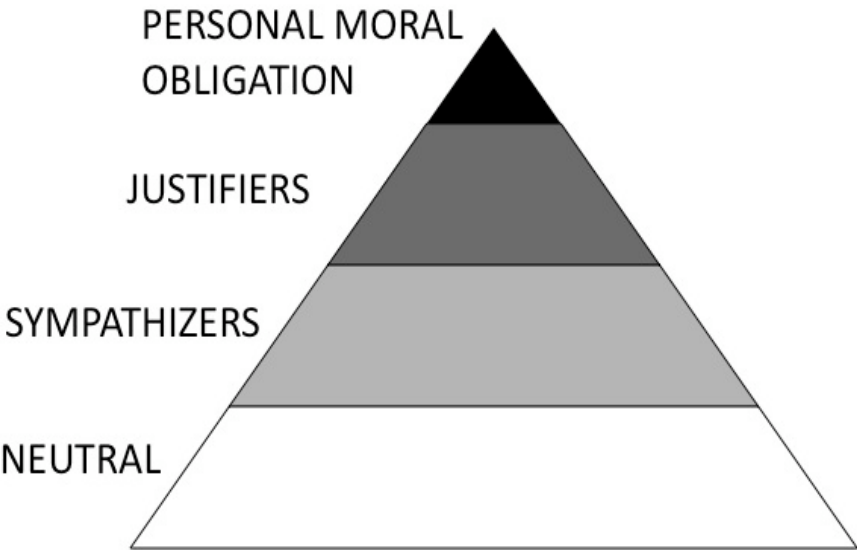
The Action Radicalization pyramid also has four layers, with politically inert individuals in the bottom layer, then activists who are ready to do something for "the cause", as long as it is legal and non-violent, then radicals who are willing to break the laws in advancing their cause, with terrorists at the apex ready to kill even unarmed civilians.

Figure 2: Radicalization in Action Pyramid
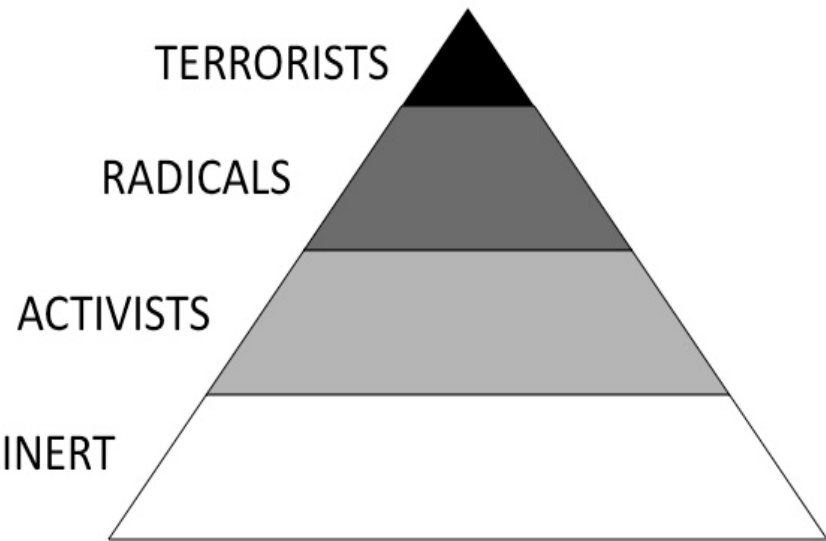
The two pyramids are not stage models. Our own and others' research demonstrated that individuals can be moved to the highest level of action pyramid (becoming terrorists) without ever engaging in activism before. [10]

The two kinds of radicalization - in opinion and in action - are not directly related. In fact, most people with radical opinion will never do anything radical. For example, in repeated polls of U.S. Muslims, about 3

percent agreed that jihad is a personal moral obligation.[11] Thus, the number of U.S. Muslims at the apex of the radical opinion pyramid projects to about 75,000 people (3% of about 2.15 million adult Muslims in the U.S.[12]). Compare this number with fewer than 100 U.S. Muslims who were found to be associated with terrorism between 2016 and 2018.[13] The difference between 75,000 at the apex of the opinion pyramid of radicalization and fewer than 100 at the apex of the action pyramid of radicalization highlights the importance of differentiating between radicalization of opinion and action.

Because of the disparity between the number of people holding radical opinions and the number likely to engage in radical action, we have argued for policing based on action, instead of policing based on opinion. Trying to police opinion exaggerates the threat a hundredfold and wastes resources. Additionally, attempts to clamp down on radical opinions can backfire - by creating real or perceived grievances in the targeted population, which can then radicalize people who would have otherwise remained neutral.

The history of opposing radical opinions is not inspiring. Some of these opinions, like franchise for women, desegregated schools and, more recently, legalized marijuana, have become mainstream. Political extremism, like terrorism, is difficult to define.

More recent is the effort to counter sympathy and support for terrorism. A major initiative against political radicalization was introduced by President Obama in February 2015 as an initiative for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE): "to discuss concrete steps the United States and its partners can take to develop community-oriented approaches to counter hateful extremist ideologies that radicalize, recruit or incite to violence."[14] The focus on opinion rather than action was already signaled by targeting "ideologies."

Millions of dollars of federal support were granted to community-based programs in over a dozen U.S. cities, notably including Los Angeles, Boston, Minneapolis, and Montgomery County (next to Washington, D.C.). These programs involved faith leaders, educators, and local NGOs. The programs have been evaluated, and two major problems have been identified.[15] First, the programs focused on Muslims rather than Right Wing (RW) extremists, thus stigmatizing Muslims while ignoring the RW origins of most recent terrorist activity in the U.S. Second, there is no evidence that these programs reduced extremist ideas, extremist activism, or extremist terrorism.

One indication of the failure of CVE programs appears in polling data. About a third of U.S. Muslims believe that "the war on terrorism is a war on Islam."[16] Fighting radical opinions, which often include disapproval of U.S. foreign policies in relation to predominantly Muslim countries[17], has not been successful. In short, rather than fighting radical opinions, it is radical action we should prioritize and try to mitigate, focusing on a much smaller group that poses a much greater threat.

In this light, the discussion of QAnon's threat now unfolding among researchers and lay public seems to be once again focusing too much on radical opinions and not enough on radical action. Consider a recent NPR/Ipsos poll of U.S. Adults[18], which found that 17% endorsed the QAnon belief that "A group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media". This 17% projects to about 36 million U.S. adults who seem to share QAnon's radical opinions. By contrast, as of 2/24/2021, only 56 QAnon followers have committed any ideologically-motivated crime in the U.S. - including the 1/6/2021 breach of the Capitol Hill in Washington, DC.[19]

Compared with the threat of jihadist terrorism in recent years, the number of QAnoners with radical opinions is much higher (36 million versus 75 thousand), but the number of QAnoners implicated in radical action is actually smaller (56 versus 100). However bizarre their beliefs, QAnon presents a very small threat of radical action. Government response to QAnon should avoid exaggerating that threat, and avoid the predictable Right Wing reaction to a government trying to police public opinion.

About the Authors:

Sophia Moskalenko *is a psychologist studying mass identity, inter-group conflict, and conspiracy theories. As a research fellow at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (NC-START), she has worked on projects commissioned by the Departments of Defense, Energy, Homeland Security, and State. She has written several books, including the award-winning Friction: How Conflict Radicalizes Them and Us (2011) and The Marvel of Martyrdom: The Power of Self-Sacrifice in the Selfish World (2019). Moskalenko received her PhD in social and clinical psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. Please direct communication about this article to:* smoskalenko@gsu.edu

Clark McCauley *is Research Professor of Psychology at Bryn Mawr College. His research interests include stereotypes, group dynamics, and the psychological foundations of ethnic conflict, genocide and terrorism. He is co-author of Why Not Kill Them All? The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder (2006), co-author of Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us (2011, second edition 2017), co-author of The Marvel of Martyrdom: The Power of Self-Sacrifice in a Selfish World (2019), co-author of Radicalization to Terrorism: What Everyone Needs to Know (2020), and Founding Editor emeritus of the journal Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict: Pathways toward Terrorism and Genocide.*

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