

# Countering Radicalization to Violent Extremism: A Comparative Study of Canada, the UK and South East Asia

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**Abstract**—Recent high-profile terrorist events in Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe – the London Bridge attacks, the terrorist attacks in Nice, France and Barcelona, Spain, the 2014 Ottawa Parliament attacks and the 2017 attacks in Edmonton – have all raised levels of public and academic concern with so-called “lone-wolf” and “radicalized” terrorism. Similarly, several countries outside of the “Western” world have been dealing with radicalization to violent extremism for several years. Many South East Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines have all had experience with what might be described as ISIS or extremist-inspired acts of terrorism. Indeed, it appears the greatest strength of groups such as ISIS has been their ability to spread a global message of violent extremism that has led to radicalization in markedly different jurisdictions throughout the world. These markedly different jurisdictions have responded with counter-radicalization strategies that warrant further comparative analysis. This paper utilizes an inter-disciplinary legal methodology. In doing so, it compares legal, political, cultural and historical aspects of the counter-radicalization strategies employed by Canada, the United Kingdom and several South East Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines). Whilst acknowledging significant legal and political differences between these jurisdictions, the paper engages in these analyses with an eye towards understanding which best practices might be shared between the jurisdictions. In doing so, it presents valuable findings of a comparative nature that are useful to both academic and practitioner audiences in several jurisdictions.

**Keywords**—Canada, United Kingdom, South East Asia, comparative law and politics, radicalization to violent extremism, terrorism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THIS paper engages in a very preliminary scan of attempts to counter radicalization to violent extremism in Canada, the United Kingdom and several South East Asian countries. Recent terrorist attacks in these jurisdictions and in other countries around the world have prompted public and academic concern with so-called “lone-wolf” or “radicalized” terrorist attacks. These attacks are largely perpetrated by individuals who come to hold extremist beliefs in a very short period of time, and often require little to no coordination or planning. As such, they are remarkably difficult to prevent and detect, and they raise questions about whether certain societal conditions (social isolation, racism, unemployment, etc.) are contributing to them. Many countries vary in their levels of

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acknowledgement (in the form of concrete policy and programs) of the phenomenon of radicalization to violence. A 2017 Public Safety Canada report provided for the first real and unequivocal acknowledgement of the threat proposed by violent radicalization, stating that “The main terrorist threat to Canada continues to stem from violent extremists inspired by terrorist groups, such as Daesh and al-Qaida” [1]. Until recently, actual measures and programs in Canada aimed at targeting the root causes of terrorism were comparatively minimal, especially in comparison with those that exist in the United Kingdom [2]. As Canada begins to place greater focus on combatting this aspect of terrorist activity, it would do well to look to other jurisdictions (such as those reviewed in this paper) that have had more significant past experience with terrorist activity and, as a result, may have novel programs Canada could consider making a part of its future counter-radicalization strategy.

It is worth noting that the 2017 Public Safety Report makes clear that the United Kingdom and several South East Asian countries face similar threats from radical extremists, providing some justification for comparison of the jurisdictions [3]. This paper will begin with a brief methodology section that explains the use of a *cultural comparativist* methodology. This methodology, previously utilized in the book *Domestic Counter-Terrorism in a Global World* [4], acknowledges the value of comparing jurisdictions even though they may have significant differences in legal system, political history, and past experiences with terrorism. The paper will then proceed through separate sections on each jurisdiction of analysis, noting key historical aspects of the country in question’s experiences with violent extremism, and the mechanisms that have been implemented with the aim of countering radicalization to violent extremism. In doing so, the paper will allow for final conclusions to be drawn about how Canada may tailor its future counter-radicalization strategies. Moreover, it will provide for a useful summary analysis for academics and policy-makers in any of the surveyed jurisdictions, or in other jurisdictions where radicalization to violence is a growing concern.

## II. METHODOLOGY: CULTURAL COMPARATIVISM

This paper follows in the methodological footsteps of cultural comparativists such as David Nelken, Liora Lazarus and Pierre Legrand [5]-[7]. The methodological focus of cultural comparativists can be sharply contrasted with the focus of those who take a universalist view towards the study

of law and criminal justice. Universalists view law as a form of functional science, engaging strictly in rule comparison and literal readings of legal materials, whereas cultural comparativists seek to go beyond rule comparison by considering the social, political and cultural dynamics that shape laws differently in different jurisdictions [4, p.9]. According to Nelken and other cultural comparativists, when comparativists merely focus on legal rules in question, “They forget about the historical, social, economic, political and cultural contexts that have made the rule or proposition what it is” [5, p.234]. That said, cultural comparativists are quick to note that “whilst the power of culture as an explanatory tool lies in the potential breadth of its descriptive reach, it is also in this its weakness lies” [6, p.12]. As a result, cultural comparativists often face criticism about the supposed non-scientific nature of the variables they try to analyze, most specifically political and cultural history. Critics of cultural comparativists and indeed even those skeptical of the kind of analyses to be done in this research paper, often point to the massive differences that may exist between jurisdictions of analysis. Nonetheless, as Legrand notes, “The question is not whether difference across laws exists: it does. The issue is rather what to make of it” [7, p.445]. While it is undoubtedly true that massive legal, political and cultural differences exist between countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, cultural comparativists embrace these differences and utilize them to inform their analyses.

### III. CANADA

The 22 October 2014 attack carried out by Michael Zehaf-Bibeau in Ottawa, Canada’s national capital, represents the most recent and significant terrorist attack in Canadian history. Bibeau, acting on his own, shot and killed Corporal Nathan Cirillo, a soldier standing guard at the National War Memorial. He then proceeded to enter the Centre Block of the Canadian Parliament, where several important members of Canada’s political parties, including the Prime Minister, were holding caucus meetings. Bibeau was eventually killed after wounding an unarmed parliamentary guard, but the brazen nature of his attack put radicalized, lone wolf-style terrorism on the top of the political agenda in Canada. Shortly after the attack, a massive package of legislation containing sprawling new anti-terrorism powers (Bill C-51) was passed by Stephen Harper’s conservative government. Incredibly, this sprawling legislation contained no laws or measures specifically designed with an eye towards addressing the root causes of terrorism and potential radicalization to violent extremism [2, p.471].

Both before and after the October 2014 attacks and the passage of Bill C-51, Canadian efforts to combat radicalization to violent extremism have been comparatively sparse. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Canada’s Federal Police Force) has previously attempted to run what has largely been an ineffective Terrorism Prevention Program, and Public Safety Canada’s Cross-Cultural Roundtable on Security has been viewed as largely ineffective, leading

commentators to argue that “attempts to dissuade people from being drawn into terrorism have suffered from comparative neglect” [2, p.471]. However, since the election of Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Party, this has begun to change. Most specifically, the establishment of a new Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence (a new division of Public Safety Canada) should be viewed as a welcome development. This Centre has been described as a key approach to countering radicalization to violence by establishing local programming within communities, including the support of local-level initiatives through a Community Resilience Fund and the support of action-oriented research [1, pp.3-4].

A key aspect of the Canada Centre’s work in its early infancy revolves around implementing effective measures to counter violent extremism on the internet. The Centre is working with Communications Service Providers and major social media platforms including Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and Google to identify and tackle online content that may be contributing to radicalization [1, p.17]. Another key aspect of the Centre’s work is its centralization/communication facilitation amongst various sectors involved in countering radicalization to violence, including social and health services, law enforcement, education and community-based organizations [1, p.17]. A federal organization with power to oversee and coordinate several different organizations and initiatives at the municipal, provincial and federal levels is the first of its kind in Canada and is certainly a welcome development, given the history of a comparative lack of such an organization in Canada. Nonetheless, given the relative infancy of the Canada Centre, the jury is still out in terms of its effectiveness, and there is still much room for future growth and development in CVE programs across Canada.

### IV. THE UNITED KINGDOM

The United Kingdom is certainly no stranger to terrorist activity, with a long and fraught political history pertaining to terrorism that stems back to the Troubles and Northern Irish terrorism in the 1970s [4, p.58]. Relatedly, the United Kingdom has more recently suffered attacks perpetrated by radicalized individuals. The most high-profile of these attacks would be the 2017 London Bridge attacks, during which eight people were killed and 48 were injured when three assailants drove a van through the London Bridge area and then began stabbing multiple people in and around restaurants and pubs. Also in 2017, a lone actor Khalid Masood drove his car into pedestrians on his way to crashing the car into the perimeter fence of the Palace of Westminster. Khalid was later shot dead after fatally stabbing an unarmed police officer. As was the case with the Canadian Parliament attacks, the 2017 attacks in London (along with others elsewhere in the UK and Europe) aroused considerable public and academic attention to the phenomenon of radicalization to violence.

The United Kingdom’s PREVENT strategy has been in place long before these attacks took place, and is comparatively robust when compared against the CVE measures that have been in place in Canada over the last

decade. Established in 2006, PREVENT has been further reinforced and entrenched into law by the 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, which allows the Secretary of State to issue specific guidance and directions to authorities involved in the countering of violent extremism (local organizations, schools, health care workers, universities, etc.) [2, pp.466-468]. These authorities are now under a direct duty to assess the risks of people being drawn into both violent and non-violent extremism, and some commentators have noted that this duty may raise concerns about the chilling of free speech and expression [8].

The key aspects of the PREVENT strategy include: 1) preventing apologists for terrorism and extremism from travelling to the UK; 2) giving guidance to local authorities and institutions to understand the threat of extremism and statutory powers available to them to challenge extremist speakers; 3) funding a specialist police unit which works to remove online content that breaches terrorist legislation; 4) supporting community based campaigns and activity which can effectively rebut terrorist and extremist propaganda; 5) using multi-agency cooperation to provide individuals at risk of being drawn into terrorism with access to health and education services, specialist mentoring services and diversionary programs [9]. It is useful to note some consistent focus areas in these two jurisdictions, including a focus on community partnerships and an explicitly stated mandate to police extremism speech on the Internet. Nonetheless, it should be noted that a wide variety of NGOs, Muslim community groups and international organizations have criticized the PREVENT strategy as counter-intuitive because of potential risks to the basic rights of young Muslims [8].

#### V. SINGAPORE, INDONESIA, THE PHILIPPINES AND MALAYSIA

The 2017 Public Safety Report has noted that Daesh has established and strengthened links with extremist groups in Southeast Asia in recent years, and also notes that Al-Qaida has increased its propaganda efforts across Asia in recent years [1, p.11]. Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines have all dealt with radicalization to varying degrees in the years since 9/11, with several significant attacks and/or foiled plots taking place across the four countries. Various attacks in Bali, Jakarta, the Southern Philippines and elsewhere have garnered significant international news media attention over the years, and the significant proportion of Muslim populations living in these countries provide authorities and legislators with a unique challenge not faced in Canada [10]. Another unique aspect of countering violent extremism in South East Asia in comparison to Canada pertains to the governance of the triborder waters of the Sulu Sea, waters off Sabah and the Celebes/Sulawesi Sea, which has been referred to as a porous and ungoverned region that presents a major problem as a result of the ease of movement for potential terrorists across borders [10].

Of these countries' responses, perhaps the most interesting post-9/11 response comes from Singapore, specifically because of how much more focus that country placed on rehabilitation than Canada. Academic commentators have

noted the exceptional and particularly useful use of "soft law" measures by Singapore in responding to violent extremism [11]. Although commentators note that these soft law mechanisms have been backed up by harsher strategies that might not be acceptable in Western societies, they nonetheless note the impressive resources invested by Singapore into the rehabilitation of terrorists and the inclusion of their families in the process [12]. A 2010 RAND study found the Singapore religious rehabilitation program to be one of the best out of those it surveyed, particularly because of the focus it placed on providing care for families of detainees and preventing the radicalization of children [13]. Regardless of concerns pertaining to Singapore's overall terrorism response post-9/11, Canada should take note of the country's efforts to provide for supplementary "soft law" counter radicalization measures that have been well received globally, particularly as a result of their focus on the families of terrorist detainees.

Indonesia again differs significantly from Canada in the sense that it is the world's most populous Muslim country, and it has a very different political climate and historical experience with terrorism [14]. Like Singapore, part of Indonesia's response to terrorism has included religious rehabilitation through the specialized activities of Detachment 88, but commentators argue that this program has been less structured and less successful and has received both praise and criticism [14, p.156]. Commentators have noted that the lack of the threat of indeterminate detention in Indonesia (which is present in Singapore and Malaysia) results in very low rates of participation in Indonesia's rehabilitation programs [12, p.200]. While some prominent international news outlets have viewed the work of Detachment 88 in a very positive light [15], others have pointed to problematic accusations of extrajudicial killings [14, p.157]. Similar to Canada, the need for additional soft measures to engage former/future terrorists, public campaigns and inter-agency cooperation in identifying and neutralizing radical movements has been suggested as a necessary element for Indonesia moving forward [16].

Several significant terrorist attacks have taken place in various parts of the Philippines over the past few years, and the abduction (and eventual execution) of two Canadians from a seaside resort in the Philippines raised significant alarm within Canada, as noted by the 2017 Public Safety Report [1, p.11]. According to the U.S. State Department, the Philippine government attempts to counter radicalization to violence through its PAMANA (Resilient Communities in Conflict Affected Communities) program by: 1) Continuing to work with the Global Counterterrorism Forum to apply the Rome Memorandum on Good Practices for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders; 2) Engaging in interagency collaboration on countering violent extremism through counter-radicalization and de-radicalization initiatives; 3) Receiving funding for the training of its countries actors responsible for counter-radicalization [17]. Some international counter-extremism commentators have praised the PAMANA program for launching social programs aimed at former combatants and their next of kin, whilst expressing concern at record-high amounts of extremists in the

prison population and the potential for further radicalization within prisons [18].

According to the U.S. Department of State, Malaysia has been particularly concerned with the foreign fighter phenomenon and the radicalization of its youth in particular [17]. Several regional programs aimed at youth have taken place, including inter-agency cooperations aimed at affecting youth positively through community policing efforts and effective monitoring of violent extremist narratives online [17].

## VI. CONCLUSION

It is naturally very difficult to point to explicit measures utilized in other jurisdictions that will be directly relevant and particularly useful for Canada as it moves forward in its efforts to combat radicalization to extremism. Any such recommendations based on the experiences of the countries surveyed here will inevitably meet with the universalist-type criticism that Canada's political and legal contexts, as well as past experiences with terrorism, are vastly different than those of even the United Kingdom, let alone the South East Asian countries analyzed. Nonetheless, in keeping with the cultural comparativist tradition, it can be argued that there are some consistent themes and lessons to be potentially learned from these jurisdictions as Canada moves forward into the future.

First and foremost, it has become abundantly clear that Canada has neglected addressing the root causes of terrorism and radicalization to violence for too long. The development of Public Safety's Canada Centre should be viewed as a welcome and important first step, but it is important that this Centre continue to receive ample funding and attention in order for it to develop to the necessary extent. Second, the UK experience seems to suggest that Canada must walk a very delicate line between counter-radicalization and potential impacts on free speech and the human rights of its citizens. In particular, Canadian efforts to counter radicalization need be cognizant of the potential for radicalization to actually be exacerbated if it is felt that certain measures are unfairly and disproportionately targeting certain communities. In this regard, the same in-depth community involvement that is present in the United Kingdom will be important to Canada moving forward. Similarly, Canada should follow the lead of the United Kingdom in continuing to monitor and address the role of the internet in facilitating radicalization to violence both at home and abroad.

Academic commentators have noted that some of the harsher measures employed in countries like Singapore or Indonesia (i.e. indeterminate detention and/or extrajudicial killings) would be nearly impossible to justify in certain Western nations, including Canada. Indeed, these types of measures would certainly cause widespread public concern in Canada, and would likely lead to much criticism of the government implementing them. Nonetheless, Canada should look to a country like Singapore in particular in regards to mirroring (or exceeding) the financial investment made into rehabilitation programs. Various aspects of Singapore's "soft law" response to countering violent radicalization have

garnered international support and praise, and Canada would do well to continue investing heavily in similar soft law responses, especially given that we have more than sufficient "hard law" counter-terrorism mechanisms already on the statute books. Moreover, both Singapore and the Philippines have made some efforts to tailor counter-radicalization mechanisms to include the families of individuals who have become radicalized and/or have acted on this radicalization in an extreme and violent matter. Canada should consider increasing the extent to which it focuses on families in order to mitigate against the possibility of future radicalization to violence, particularly amongst youth and next of kin of radicalized individuals

Although the Philippines has certainly struggled with its counter-radicalization efforts, one aspect of its response (the training of its various officials responsible for counter-radicalization) is potentially useful for Canada. For example, it has been noted that both the RCMP and Corrections Canada could benefit from additional training and resources pertaining to counter-radicalization [2, p.467]. The Canadian government should continue allocating additional resources so that these actors, as well as those within other agencies responsible for counter-radicalization, can receive the specialized training necessary in order to best perform their duties. Lastly, Canada should follow Malaysia's lead in focusing on the counter-radicalization of youth, perhaps through the founding of similar task forces aimed specifically at youth who are risk of radicalization to violence.

Lastly, several jurisdictions studied here have evidenced a focus on the Internet and its role in propagating extremist ideas, particularly amongst youth. The Canada Centre should continue to invest and work in collaboration with Communications Service Providers and major social media platforms including Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and Google to identify and tackle online content that may be contributing to radicalization. This particular aspect of Canada's efforts to counter radicalization to violence will only grow more relevant and pertinent as technology inevitably continues to pervade the social lives of all Canadians, particularly our youth.

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