

Opinion: Terrorist groups and cults have some things in common

We need to understand that those who are more vulnerable to the appeal of extreme or marginal groups are often going through a transition period, or they need an authority figure to tell them what to do.

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FILE - This undated file image posted on a militant website on Jan. 14, 2014, which has been verified and is consistent with other AP reporting, shows fighters from the al-Qaida linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) marching in Raqqa, Syria. U.S. Arab allies Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait are discussing creation of a military pact to take on Islamic militants, with the possibility of a joint force to intervene around the Middle East, The Associated Press has learned in Nov. 2014. Even if no joint force is agreed on, the alliance would coordinate military action, aiming at quick, pinpoint operations against militants rather than longer missions, officials said. (AP Photo/Militant Website, File)

Recent attacks by terrorists here and abroad have led some people to suggest that the process of radicalization is similar to cult recruitment. Some have stated that terrorist groups are cults.

Whether or not they are, there is one striking similarity, and that is the violence that is perpetrated by some groups toward individuals and society.

Info-Cult's focus has been on how and why people join extremist and marginal groups, how these groups function, how they change over time and the role of leaders in these groups. The recent global concerns about radicalization, extremism and violence, therefore, are what we have been dealing with since we began operating in 1980.

Not all groups that are labelled as cults or extremist groups are similar. A helpful way to understand the spectrum of groups in our society is to see them as existing on a continuum — from groups that are open and tolerant, with a leadership that is non-authoritarian and respectful toward their members and non-members, to groups that are closed and intolerant, with an authoritarian leadership that is disrespectful of its members and the rest of society. All groups fall somewhere in between the extremes. We have learned, however, that the high-control groups at the latter extreme are the ones that pose a higher potential risk of causing harm to their members and to society at large.

The reality is that some people and certain groups will resort to violence as a means to achieve what they believe to be justifiable ends. This is not a new phenomenon.

Witness such groups as the Symbionese Liberation Army (United States), the Baader-Meinhof Gang (Germany) and the Red Brigades (Italy). As Canada and other countries focus on radicalization as it pertains to Islamist groups and ideology, it is clear that followers of other extreme ideologies have resorted and will resort to violence. Timothy McVeigh and the bombing of a U.S. Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City in 1995 is one example that comes to mind.

In most of these cases, youth and young adults who are recruited or join groups are looking for meaning in their lives. Bright and idealistic, many have lost confidence in society's traditional institutions, and want to contribute to making the world a better place. We need to understand that those who are more vulnerable to the appeal of extreme or marginal groups are often going

through a transition period, or they need an authority figure to tell them what to do. Feeling alone and adrift, they may also be looking for a sense of belonging to a group, where they feel special and part of a chosen elite.

The need to believe and belong is a very powerful motivating force and can be easily manipulated by those groups seeking to gain new followers.

Rather than simply finding labels to categorize groups as cults or death cults, or their members as fanatics, crazy or deranged, we should be focusing on why people join or are recruited into extremist groups, how these groups operate and what strategies can be deployed to counter them.

Extremist groups have been with us for centuries and will not disappear.

We need to be reminded that collaboration and communication between government agencies is vital. What's more, individuals and groups across diverse cultures also have an instrumental role to play in countering extremism. Consultative forums can serve as an important means for sharing collective wisdom in order to determine responsible and effective responses to the phenomenon of extremism. By working together, we can play a significant role in countering the radicalization and extreme, violent acts that are becoming increasingly prevalent in our society.

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