



BRIDGING EDUCATION AND LAW ENFORCEMENT FOR COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Date: November 24, 2021

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 24, 2021, Dr. Ratna Ghosh, a Distinguished James McGill Professor and W.C. Macdonald Professor of Education at McGill University, presented on *Bridging Education and Law Enforcement for Countering Violent Extremism* at the 2021 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question and answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed included the utilization of soft versus hard power approaches against violent extremism, how radicalization triggers can be addressed in schools, and how communities can contribute to the prevention of youth radicalization.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Dr. Ghosh discussed the disconnect between governments, educational institutions, and law enforcement when countering the global security concern of violent extremism and radicalization. Governments implement hard power methods such as surveillance to tackle radicalization; however, soft power approaches, such as bridging social gaps and critical thinking skills are not only cost friendly but also very effective in preventing the development of extremism.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, Dr. Ghosh reiterated the importance of training teachers on how to handle sensitive topics such as violent extremism despite the fact that education is not incorporated in counter-terrorism policies in Canada which also does not have a national education ministry.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the meaningless nature of borders as issues such as violent extremism and radicalization continue to be a growing issue across territorial boundaries. The phrase ‘violent extremism’ is often challenging to define as there is no universal definition of an extremist. In addition, an individual who is defined as an ‘extremist’ by some, can also be seen as a hero by others. Dr. Ghosh noted that according to the Brookings Institute, violent extremism is defined as ideologically-motivated violence, beliefs, and acts that individuals implement to achieve socio-economic and political goals. A hierarchy of values is used to morally justify these violent acts, which can cause radicalization, the adoption of extremist ideology, and terrorism.

When compared to the governments’ hard power strategies, such as surveillance, education offers a softer, more efficient, and inexpensive method of combating violent extremism and radicalization. Despite this, Dr. Ghosh stated that educational institutions are overlooked in counter-terrorism policies and no training or funding towards education countering extremism is provided. On the other hand, extremist groups like ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) have utilized education and soft power—programs used to educate youth on extremist beliefs—to advertise their belief systems in hopes of radicalizing young minds. Therefore, Dr. Ghosh stated that rather than focusing on only hard power strategies toward extremism, education could be effectively utilized to encourage the fostering of resilience through critical global citizenship and management of triggers that cause young minds to be radicalized. These radicalization triggers include marginalization and discrimination, which pose a serious challenge because the individuals most vulnerable to radicalization are those who are neglected in today’s neo-liberal oriented school systems. Thus, the development and dissemination of knowledge is required.

Dr. Ghosh pointed out that critical thinking, citizenship, and respect for diversity are not subjects taught throughout all types of education systems, yet they are essential to the battle against violent extremism. Sensitive topics that can be politically charged, such as violent extremism, are discouraged in all educational systems. Thus, causing students to search for answers themselves because of their curiosity and lack of knowledge.

In Dr. Ghosh’s research study, *Countering Religious Extremism Through Education in Multicultural Canada*, she found that most students linked the

definition of violent extremism to Islamic extremists. The study included students with varying prior knowledge of violent extremism. Furthermore, teachers reported that they refrain from discussing violent extremism because they are not knowledgeable on the topic. During the rare moments when violent extremism is discussed, it is only related to Islamic terrorism. This indicates lack of education and knowledge both students and teachers have of violent extremism.

The Canadian government's counter-terrorism strategy is reactive because it strongly focuses on hard power methods as a response to already radicalized individuals rather than utilizing the soft power of education to target the root of the problem which can prevent radicalization which would be proactive. Dr. Ghosh suggested that education should be included in counter-terrorism policies as a soft power approach and valuable tactic to address problems of marginalization and discrimination. Thus, effectively addressing the 'push and pull' factors of extremist radicalization and preventing youth from being pushed towards violent extremism.

Dr. Ghosh concluded her presentation by emphasizing that violent extremism is a global issue that requires both soft and hard power strategies to counter. Therefore, the education system must work alongside law enforcement and the community to combat extremism before radicalization occurs because once it has taken place, de-radicalization is a complex and lengthy process of disassembling ideologies. Similar to teachers, police in schools have a responsibility to contribute to counter-terrorism by educating students on violent extremism and the consequences that accompany this path. By working together to tackle social gaps and extremist beliefs, law enforcement and schools can proactively prevent students from being radicalized.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, Dr. Ghosh noted that today, the most important task for countering violent extremism and radicalization is to educate and train teachers on how to handle controversial topics and any potential triggers that push students towards anti-social activities. One reason education is not incorporated in counter-terrorism policies may be because education is a provincial responsibility and a federal education ministry does not exist to create a national curriculum that addresses violent extremism. Furthermore, despite the growing radicalization issues in Canada, teachers are given no training on how to handle controversial topics, so Dr. Ghosh opined that this needs to be addressed immediately.

Dr. Ghosh stated it is crucial to contemplate what kind of education we want to move forward with and whether important topics such as global citizenship should be incorporated into the curriculum. This is essential to mitigating factors that can lead to violence, specifically violent extremism.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- Violent extremism is a global security threat that has been shown to transcend international borders, making it difficult to define because of the varying and subjective understandings of the word ‘extreme.’
- Together, governments’ hard power strategies and the soft power approach of educational institutions can collaboratively and effectively tackle violent extremism and radicalization.
- When teachers are uneducated on violent extremism, it causes children to be vulnerable to radicalization as their unsatisfied curiosity will lead them to potentially harmful sources for information.
- Pedagogy, citizenship, and respect for diversity are essential elements to tackling extremism and radicalization thus, both reactive and proactive strategies must be utilized to tackle this growing global issue.
- Law enforcement, teachers, and the community must work together to educate youth on violent extremism and tackle social gaps that might alienate them and lead them to radicalization.

Question Period

- To help prevent radicalization, teachers must be trained on how to handle violent extremism and any potential triggers associated with it.
- It is difficult to include education in counter-terrorism policies because education is a provincial responsibility where each province has varying curriculums with no oversight from the federal ministries.
- We must reflect on improvement methods for the current educational system. Important topics, such as global citizenship, should be incorporated to prevent radicalization of young minds.



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

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