Government Research Priorities for TSAS

TSAS works with a number of departments in government. This document alerts academic researchers to the questions that policy analysts find most interesting and relevant to their work. The list that follows has been compiled from statements made by our network of partners. We have made an effort to remove some of the more obvious redundancies but in a number of cases we have listed priorities that overlap considerably, to ensure that the nuances of interpretation by our various partners are preserved.

Researchers should note that although TSAS is an independent network, the research undertaken by our affiliates will have greater resonance in policy circles if it is pursued with one or more of these issues or questions in mind. This list is not exhaustive, and is subject to change.

Radicalization processes

1. A literature review summarizing the difference between mobilization to violence* and radicalization, and what exists for the former in academic work / sources.

   Extremists are by their nature diverse with regards to their ideology, background and objectives: some may sound extreme and demonstrate high levels of radicalization, and yet never take action on their ideas. Others may not appear particularly far advanced in the radicalization pathway and yet decide to mobilize to violence. Understanding what preparation for terrorist activity looks like is critical to determining if someone is moving from being a "talker" to a "walker". This progression is called mobilization to violence, i.e. the specific activities / behaviours that sustain and allow radicalized individuals to conduct some form of terrorist activity.

2. The radicalization of second-generation immigrants to Canada, both converts and those from Muslim backgrounds.

3. Why a radicalized person who has begun his/her mobilization to violence will stop mobilizing to violence? Which objective and measurable indicators will cease to appear? (Note that this topic is closely related to topic 7.)

4. The differences in the mobilization to violence pathways between adults and youth.

5. How to measure/calculate the speed of mobilization to violence?

6. Related to radicalization / foreign fighters: Despite the significant number of foreign fighters, the fact remains that the number of Canadian Muslims travelling to Syria is still relatively small when compared to the much larger pool of youngsters who are, in principle, willing to join jihad, but don't do so. While it is important to understand why and how some Canadians become foreign fighters, it is also important to understand why many others stay in Canada, even though they, too, support jihad and martyrdom.

   This topic would try to answer the following two inter-related questions:

   i. What are the rhetorical phrasings and emotionalized expressions used by Canadian Muslims on social media to legitimize martyrdom and the use of violence? Content analysis

       ii. What are the reasons that some refrain from violence despite the fact that they admire martyrs and seem to agree on the idea that violence is justified on the basis of their religious convictions? Interviews of small sample group(s)

7. Assessing the relative strength of Al-Qaeda and ISIL and the possibility of continued antagonism between the groups or collaboration.
8. Youth and youth radicalization.
9. Interview-based case studies of former foreign fighters focused on questions of radicalization and de-radicalization experiences and processes.
10. Interview-based case studies of former terrorists who were active in Canada focused on questions of radicalization and de-radicalization experiences and processes.
11. The importance of social networking in the radicalization/de-radicalization process (i.e. small group dynamics vs. demographic risk factors).

Radicalization and Recruitment in the Prison Setting
12. Comparative study of organized crime vs. terrorist convicted/violent extremist group member recruitment capabilities (i.e. methods, tactics, targeted populations or persons) within the prison setting.
13. Measure of the effectiveness of radicalization/counter violent extremism (CVE) Awareness Training for correctional staff (e.g. courses, programs, booklets, pamphlets, indicators, guidelines, etc.)
14. A comparison of the process and relative "success" of offender radicalization in prison by prison converts vs. radicalization by established terrorist and violent extremist offenders.

Disengagement and De-radicalization
15. Disengagement from violent extremism – Comparison and evaluation of prison-based interventions, measures and programs.
16. Political and religious counter-narrative messaging (e.g. effective delivery strategies/models, individual vs. group comparative analysis).
17. Al Qaeda inspired Islamist terrorists' views / attitudes on being criminalized – charged, convicted, and incarcerated (freedom, injustice, martyrdom, civil responsibility, etc.).
18. The role of scholars/experts (religious, political, etc.) in the rehabilitation of terrorist convicted and violent extremist offenders (i.e. in relation to de-radicalization).
19. The role of community support (i.e. family, community members, faith/religious services) in the successful reintegration of terrorist convicted and violent extremist offenders.
20. Maintenance (continued engagement) vs. Desistance (discontinue radical beliefs and activities) of radical ideology/behaviour post-release among those offenders radicalized during their period of incarceration.
21. Application of survivor analysis approach to social networks of radicalization / recruitment. There is a body of knowledge concerning the importance of friends and associates in determining an individual's likelihood and access to joining a terrorist group. But, not everyone who knows a terrorist becomes one. What are the factors that strengthen an individual's resistance to seeking out or being recruited by a terrorist group through their social network?

22. Applying a survivor analysis approach, research into the traits and experiences of individuals who have worked in a foreign conflict zone for medical or other humanitarian purposes. The purpose is to look for reasons why they decided not take up arms in the conflict. This could uncover opportunities to help communities divert individuals into constructive roles in a foreign conflict.

Religion & Prison-Based Faith Service Providers

23. Potentially conflicting role of religious service providers (i.e. chaplains, imams) in correctional settings – rehabilitation and reform vs. security observer (and associated service reporting requirements).
24. Comparative study of religious conversion models as applied to offenders within a correctional setting (both Provincial/Territorial and Federal)
25. Prison-based offender faith worship - benefits (reform and coping) vs. disadvantages (radical conversion and groupthink)

Miscellaneous

26. Comparative study of Aboriginal Canadian (First Nation land claims and Sovereignty political protests) & right wing anti-government movements (I.e. Freeman on the Land - Sovereigns).
27. How does the definition/interpretation of the term "radicalization" differ among community faith groups and between these groups and our criminal justice/law enforcement partners?

Patterns of recruitment and participation – for radicalization to violence and/or mobilization to action

28. Even though there is no single factor, or simple set of them, can we be more confident in some vs. others, for particularly types of pathway/clusters of factors?
29. What are reliable indicators for progressions in escalation in stages along a pathway (e.g. from grievance formation, to development of intent, to development of capabilities, to preparation to act)?
30. Are there important differences across types of pathway (e.g. lone actor versus more organized group), including in the online environment?
31. What identifiable factors are most closely associated to various roles in support of violent extremism, where examples of roles are financing, recruiting, conducting an attack at home, traveling abroad to fight, etc.?
32. How should we think about the relative impact of ideological and non-ideological factors (e.g. more general needs such as for belonging and identity/meaning, and vulnerabilities such as impact of trauma)?
33. What are meaningful protective factors e.g. that reduce susceptibility to recruitment and participation in violent movements?
34. How can we better understand the 'socialization' process involved in radicalization to violence so as to better understand access points?
35. What kinds of signals or indicators ('leakage') are easier to observe by bystanders during processes of recruitment and mobilization?
36. Are there patterns in how acts of terrorism produce imitation or escalation?
37. How can we better draw meaningful conclusions from comparison groups, e.g. with similar risk/need/protective factors but who never become involved?

38. Applied to current theatres of conflict which involve foreign terrorist fighters, what are the current trends in recruitment, mobilization and participation?

Group dynamics

39. What do we know about co-offending dynamics, including online?
40. What do we know about the role of influencers/ideologues in group dynamics?
41. How do group dynamics make it more/less easy or attractive to join?
42. What do we know about groups deciding to promote lone actor attacks for strategic/tactical reasons?
43. What kinds of events, including those that impact narratives, change behaviour (e.g. travel)?
44. What are the impacts of community perceptions of real or perceived grievances?
45. How do extremist narratives work and how might they be countered effectively?
46. What are meaningful protective factors and dynamics, e.g. the role of credible community or family members in diverting to a more pro-social pathway?
47. What do we know about 'reciprocal radicalization' between e.g. far-right groups and other groups/communities?
48. From what we know about how social networks draw people into terrorism, it is possible that the internal culture of the movement may be as or more important than the ideology in attracting members. What do we know about this, and how can we use this knowledge to support prevention efforts?

Community context

49. Are there good examples for raising awareness that also mitigate against stigmatization and fear?
50. What is the impact of language on community engagement?
51. With respect to legitimacy in outreach and awareness-raising, what is the place for law enforcement?
52. When is it more important to focus on general community safety/violence prevention versus specific focus on violent extremism/terrorism?
53. How do 'bystander effects' (not reporting in face of clear signs of risk) manifest in different social circles, and what are effective ways to address them?
54. What are important 'natural' community protective dynamics, e.g. that work against narratives of recruitment and polarization, offline and online? How can these be supported without harming their legitimacy?
55. What does success in government/community partnership look like, including across sectors (education, health, etc.), and with sectors such as the media?
56. What else should we understand about how diaspora communities interact with countries of ancestry?
57. Are there significant differences between countries in terms of experiences with radicalization, terrorism and extremism and what can we learn from them?
58. Issues of social inclusion and exclusion in Canadian society.

Design and measurement of prevention efforts

59. In high risk environments, when/how do you transfer risk to community partners (including private sector, e.g. re resourcing of terrorist activities)? How do you maintain due diligence? Or, who should perform what kinds of intervention under what layer(s) of supervision and accountability?

60. When should specific CVE-related training be required versus general expertise in areas such as counseling, health, mental health, and youth-at-risk?

61. How do we best draw and keep the line between prevention and enforcement?

62. What is the place for intelligence services in the prevention space?

63. What is the impact (e.g. on individuals and at the community level) of false positives from risk assessments?

64. What are good practices for sharing information and protecting privacy across organizations, including for non-law enforcement/security sectors?

65. Are there useful frameworks to inform interventions where, when, and by whom?

66. Are there good examples of clear 'theories of change' to inform online and/or offline approaches to intervention? With multiple factors and pathways for vulnerability and processes of radicalization to violence, what are meaningful, achievable examples of trying to bring change to behaviours and/or attitudes?

67. Among more public health/broad prevention approaches (e.g. general critical thinking skills in face of online propaganda), what areas would be most relevant for investment given the purpose of countering violent extremism and mitigating the impacts of terrorism?

68. What more should we understand about the nexus between online and offline behaviour, particularly in relation to aspects such as recruitment and the involvement of youth?

69. How do we know if narrative-based interventions are working (alternative narratives, counter-narratives, restricting access to content, etc.)? Are there good examples?

70. Contradictions between the internal culture and the stated goals & values of groups can be an important reason for voluntary departures. With diverse organizational cultures in different terrorist groups and movements, there are in effect many terrorisms. What do we know about this, and how can we use this knowledge to improve tailored prevention and demobilization efforts?

71. Research on best approaches to engage with diverse communities and milieus in order to prevent radicalization to violence. This research needs to go beyond the Muslim communities to examine best practices and approaches specific to other communities and milieus where individual or organized acts of violence have or could occur and could include, for example: anti-tax/anti-government milieus, First Nations communities, or immigrant communities with ongoing homeland conflicts.

72. The impact of Canadian counter-terrorism measures and media coverage on youth and their sense of belonging, with regard to different cultural, religious, and social group perspectives.

Other

73. Global trends with respect to citizenship policy and national security? For example, what countries have provisions to revoke/remove citizenship for serious offences/terrorism? Which of these countries applies these revocation/removal provisions to dual citizens only, and how do they determine whether an individual is a dual citizen?

74. Scenario analysis of the future(s) of right-wing terrorism in Canada, in light of current trends in the USA and Europe.
75. Network analysis relating to best practices in operations to disrupt terrorist groups / networks
76. Research on the roles of women in terrorist movements from various ideological and cultural contexts, including examinations of recruiting and radicalization, operational roles, and influence of women as actors in their own right.
77. Long-term evolution of cyber terrorism – potential futures.