CoPPRa: Community policing and prevention of radicalisation

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“I’m really pleased to see that the CoPPRa project specifically addresses one of the most important but, in counter-terrorism context at least, perhaps least visible groups: community policing officers. These officers should be familiar with the complex phenomenon that is terrorism and should not see counter-terrorism as a task for specialists only.”²

“National security depends on neighbourhood security. It will not be a Special Branch officer at Scotland Yard who first confronts a terrorist but a local cop or a local community support officer.”³

Introduction

The European Union (EU) home affairs commissioner, Cecilia Malmström, explained at the ‘Radicalisation Awareness Network’ high level conference in January 2013 that the potential for violent extremism existed in all countries, which is why the EU and its member states had to improve detecting and preventing the potential menaces. The people best suited to tackle the phenomenon of radicalisation are the so called first-liners – people in direct contact with targeted individuals or vulnerable groups within the population.

There is always a local dimension to terrorism: whether it is the place where terrorists hide, live, find support, operate, do their surveillance or execute an attack. A local approach to preventing terrorism and violent extremism is therefore necessary.

There is sufficient reason to believe that community policing officers (or in general “frontline” police officers) are in the position to detect warning signals and gather essential information to detect terrorist activities at an early stage. It is not suggested that community policing can prevent all terrorist attacks, but community information is an essential component of any counter-terrorism policy.

¹ Police Commissioner, Expert/trainer community policing and prevention of radicalisation. National Police Netherlands, EU project CoPPRa
² Gilles de Kerchove, European Union Counter Terrorism Coordinator, Foreword CoPPRa Training manual - 2010
³ Sir Ian Blair (former Metropolitan Police Commissioner) Statement after the London attack July 2005
Radicalisation: a process

The academic world has come up with numerous theories trying to explain the process of radicalisation. There are multiple pathways that constitute the process of radicalisation, which can be independent but are usually mutually reinforcing. In 2005, Victoroff⁴ published an article on the existing explanatory models of radicalisation and terrorism. He concluded that not one, single theory can formulate an all-embracing answer to the question –“what are the causes and roots of radicalisation”. However, he came to the conclusion that the process of radicalisation consists of different stages.

Fathali Moghaddam, Professor and Director of the Conflict Resolution Program at Georgetown University (US) developed the ‘Stair Case model’. Moghaddam uses the metaphor of a narrowing staircase leading to the terrorist act at the top of the building. Every staircase leads to a higher floor (level). Whether a person remains at a certain floor, goes down or climbs to a higher level depends on a number of factors (push and pull factors). As individuals climb the staircases, they see fewer and fewer choices (the stairs become smaller and smaller and thus the way back more and more difficult), until the only possible outcome is the destruction of others, or oneself, or both. This kind of ‘decision tree’ conceptualisation of behaviour has proved to be a powerful tool in psychology.

Every society hosts dissatisfied people, who feel deprived or unfairly treated. From this group a certain number will look for justice. They will organise meetings, demonstrations or other similar events. In our democratic society this is allowed as long as there are no criminal offences involved in these activities. A large group of these individuals will stay at this level and will continue to seek justice in a legal way.

A small group, however, will climb up one level because their actions did not produce the result they had hoped for. They become frustrated and will start looking for like minded people with similar ideas and opinions - in real life as well as on the internet. In this phase of

the process they may join a radical group. At this level they could be introduced to recruiters, preachers or charismatic individuals who will offer them an explanation for their anger and frustrations; an explanation often blaming authorities or Western society in general. Or they watch extremist videos on the internet. Finally, a very small group will move up to the final and highest level, the stage of committing a terrorist act. The duration this process will take differs. Sometimes it takes years, however, in case of foreign fighters going to Syria case studies have shown that youngsters radicalise within a few months or even weeks.

Radicalisation is a process. Every person ending up at the top has undergone these steps. But it is very clear that this is not an automatic process. This means that at every level a large group will stay or even return to a lower level. Only a very small group will go through the entire process.

The simple fact that someone gives evidence of one of the indicators (growing a beard and starting to wear a jelleba or shaving his head and wearing army boots) does not immediately indicate that someone is radicalising, let alone that he should be labelled a ‘terrorist’. One should look at the overall picture of the changes that can be observed. These indicators are only visible for those who know how someone behaved in the past and what changes have taken place in the meantime. But for those who know what to look at, what are early indicators?

The process of radicalisation differs from one person to another and for this reason the possible signs and indicators must always be evaluated in their full context. In order to assess the indicators correctly, it is crucial to have thorough background knowledge. If the indicators are assessed incorrectly, the police work may instead push the radicalisation process forward. It is very difficult for police officers without special training to identify an ongoing process of radicalisation. Hence, the most important role of frontline police officers is to detect the signals and forward the information to the designated departments or organisations.
Role of frontline police officers in this process of radicalisation

Every day police officers encounter numerous people in different situations. During these encounters they may see something that might indicate that a person is radicalised, radicalising others or that an activity is planned or prepared, which is violent or even terrorist. Police officers may come across these warning signs while conducting a routine traffic stop, house search, interview, surveillance, entering a house in the case of a domestic incident, or just while engaging with the community. During the normal course of their work, frontline police officers might well be the first to be confronted with signs and indicators of violent radicalisation. They should consider it a part of their routine job to be on the lookout for signs of terrorist activity, just as they would for mainstream criminality.

It is very important that every police officer is aware that his observations and reports can make a difference. Knowing how to recognise these early warning indicators and how to respond to them may prevent a possible act of terrorism or stop a person in the process of radicalisation. It is, therefore, essential that frontline police officers can interpret what they see and hear in their communities and, with a proper awareness of the indicators, put this into context, in order to identify and report activities that are dangerous or suspicious.
The CoPPRa project

The CoPPRa project (= Community Policing and Prevention of Radicalisation) started during the Belgian EU Presidency in 2010 and was set up to develop tools in order to prevent terrorist acts through the early detection of potential signs of radicalisation by frontline police officers. The CoPPRa project is the result of the cooperation between 11 EU Member States with the Belgian integrated police as project leader of CoPPRa (Jean-Pierre Devos). The project was funded by the European Commission through ISEC.

The project is based on the assumption that regular frontline police officers – community policing officers – have an important role to play in preventing radicalisation as they work on the streets, know and understand their local communities, and tend to have good community skills. This means they are well equipped to detect the signs of radicalisation at an early stage and work in partnership with local communities to prevent or tackle it.

The CoPPRa project had three areas of activity:

1) The creation of a practical, user friendly tool to support frontline police officers in detecting signs of radicalisation at an early stage. This tool has taken the form of a “pocket guide”, which includes guidelines on community engagement, brief information on the indicators and symbols and the whole range of violent extremist and terrorist groups operating across Europe (extremist right and left wing, ideology based and single issue). The pocket guide has a manageable size, is highly visual and written in a basic and accessible style.

2) The development of a common curriculum for training frontline police officers on how to use the tool in their daily work. With the assistance of experts from different EU countries, a manual for trainers is developed, which can be used by police schools or the individuals responsible for trainings within respective police forces. This trainers-manual includes background information that can be used when training frontline police officers and allows trainers to tailor the training to the specific local threat context. It includes material on terminology, the radicalisation process, indicators, case studies, how to build community relations, legal frameworks, and group profiles.
3) The identification and exchange of good practices on how to stop the spread of radicalisation in close partnership with local partners. A number of examples are provided in the training manual and ideas were exchanged at the EU CoPPRa-conference organised in September 2010.

The pocket guide and the training manual are available free of charge and are translated in the official languages of all EU Member States.

Impact of the project

During the Ministers of Justice and Home Affairs meeting (02.12.2010), the Council of European Union adopted Council Conclusions on the role of the police and civil society in combating violent radicalisation and recruitment of terrorists.

In this conclusion the Council welcomed the tools derived from operational needs developed by the CoPPRa project, invited member states to provide appropriate tools for their first line police officers and recommended the utilization of the results of the CoPPRa project. The CoPPRa I project finished on 31 December 2010.

COPPRA II

In July 2011 the CoPPRa project was prolonged for another two years with ISEC funding from the European Commission. In this project 15 member states and CEPOL participate. During a period of two years, 25 activities will be carried out within the framework of CoPPRa II.

The objectives of the CoPPRa II project are:

1) Updating and further development of the CoPPRa tools. The phenomenon of radicalisation is permanently evolving. Therefore the CoPPRa-tools need a constant update as well. A content development team has discussed new phenomena and identified new good practices. Chapters on Lone Actors and Foreign Fighters are added and some parts of the text are rewritten (Osama Bin Laden is no longer alive and some attacks needed to be mentioned e.g. Anders Breivik). A second edition of the CoPPRa Pocket Guide and the Trainer Manual will be published in the second
semester of 2013. Also a CoPPRa website, www.coppra.eu will start on 1 October 2013 to share this information between the competent law enforcement bodies in all EU Member States. This website will include information on 26 good practices from all over Europe.

2) Organising five one-week Train-the-trainer programmes. The objective of the Train-the-trainer programme was to train CoPPRa trainers in all EU Member States. In 2012 this has been done in regional courses throughout the EU. The objective was to equip participants with the necessary tools to organise CoPPRa trainings for frontline police officers in their own country. Each country could send a maximum of five participants. In total, 136 trainers from 26 countries have attended this one-week CoPPRa training. Beginning 2013, representatives from the participating countries have given their feedback on the training based on the practical experience in their countries. At least 15 countries have implemented (part of) the CoPPRa material in their training for frontline police officers. Some countries have developed a one-day course for frontline police officers; others have adapted the CoPPRa material to their (regional) needs. Some countries have put the CoPPRa material on their Intranet website and in some countries other organisations (e.g. prison services) use the CoPPRa material as well.

3) The creation of an E-learning module based on the CoPPRa trainer manual. This E-learning module has been established in cooperation with and hosted by CEPOL (European Police Academy). The CoPPRa tools are already available on the website of CEPOL. On 12 November CEPOL will organise a so-called ‘webinar’ to introduce CoPPRa and the CoPPRa E-learning tool.

In the meantime several countries outside of Europe have indicated that they are very interested in the CoPPRa project and CoPPRa tools.