

Kelly Bronwell:

Hello, my name is Kelly Brownell and I'm the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. My guest today is David Chancer who's the Director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security and associate professor of the practice at the Sanford School. David is an expert on terrorism and extremism, and we're very happy to have him here today. There's increasing concern about violent acts committed by religious extremists around the world. The rise of ISIS, for example, in particular, concern about such acts being carried out on US soil. David, I'm happy to have you here.

David Chancer:

Well, thanks for having me Kelly.

Kelly Bronwell:

So let's begin by talking about a term that I've seen you write about called countering violent extremism. Explain what you mean by violent extremism.

David Chancer:

Well, Kelly violent extremism is just one of the many forms of political violence and you could put them all in a lumping them from war, which in many ways is the most legitimate form of political violence because it is sanctioned by a state. Indeed it's governed by the international law, the law of war, ranging all the way from an individual who explodes a bomb in a crowded marketplace for political protest. The kind of extremist I'm looking at falls more towards the latter and maybe individuals and then groups who use violence for political purpose and principally the violence is targeted at civilians to create fear, which the perpetrators hope will generate some form of either support for their movement or political change.

Kelly Bronwell:

I'd like to talk about what's being done about this and to talk about the roots of extremism. But before I do that, you mentioned that there's a goal of the extreme acts to provoke political change, to draw attention, and things like that. Are they effective?

David Chancer:

Well, we have very few examples really. Most of them are not effective. Most of these groups die out over time, with their objectives unfulfilled. Most recently, we saw the Tamil Tigers had a longstanding insurgency against the government of that group is no more. The FARC in Columbia still has some elements but have not been successful. Al-Qaeda has ABD; maybe now it's coming back a little bit. So, by and large, the use of these kinds of tactics is not successful. There are some small, a number of successes, many point to some of the terrorism that took place in a Colonial Palestine under the British mandate as having maybe expedited the British departure from that part. My sense is they were on their way out, but the terrorism perhaps pushed them more quickly.

Kelly Bronwell:

So let's talk about the roots. What are some of the social-economic political-cultural conditions that breed extreme acts like this?

David Chancer:

Well, there are many, and they depend on the different causes that people latch on to. So in the United States, in the last ten years, we're seeing perhaps a rise in what we would call anti-government extremism, and that has a certain type of roots. And then, of course, there's the Al-Qaeda ISIS movement, which I would say it was more of a global movement of Muslim grievance among a sect of Muslims, about many things, going back to historical roots of the way that Islam has evolved over time and politics. One thing; that people really tend not to understand is that they see the extremists as being angry individuals almost engage in some sort of barbaric, inhuman conduct that has no purpose, and it is kind of raw senseless violence. And while I would agree, the violence itself is senseless. They forget that this is really all about politics. It's usually not about this random blood loss to kill, but it all goes back to some form of political grievance. And if we want to solve this kind of violence, we have to understand that.

Kelly Bronwell:

So what are some of the main political grievances that we're seeing regarding terrorism within our own borders?

David Chancer:

Sure so with respect to the people who are inspired by the Al-Qaeda and ISIS ideology here in the United States, this really goes back to an idea that the west, whether it be nation-states like the United States and the UK, or basically the Judeo-Christian society is at war with Islam and Muslims. And that the West wants to dominate both economically territorially politically and damage and harm both Muslims and Islamic nations. And so, they see themselves as fighting back against that. And we can see elements in both the history and politics that they interpret in their way into this paradigm of a war against Muslims, so they see them fighting back against that, and actually for identifying with, and sacrificing for a true love for their religion. But I think more than their religion, their identification with Muslim people all over the world. That's the core sense of grievance with-

Kelly Bronwell:

[crosstalk 00:05:42] you mentioned that because my guess is, I don't know that this is true you would know better than I, but it would seem that many Americans view the acts by Muslims as more wanting to force their way of thinking on us rather survival of their own culture and their own religion. And I wonder if that opinion that Americans have about that is getting in the way of more constructive action?

David Chancer:

Well, I think it is, and the mere notion that these small numbers of radicals engaged in albeit a brutal violence is somehow going to change the wealthiest strongest nation-state in the history of civilization and is going to somehow dominate us, is both to me, bizarre and frankly, a bit paranoid, and we should buck up a bit 9/11 definitely was a real kick in the knees. And it was a absolutely devastating event, but it was not an existential threat to the United States. Even if we had more 9/11 style, it would hurt bad, but it's not an existential threat. So we're bigger, we're very strong, and we can manage this violence. And I wish we would do that from a sense of that kind of confidence more frequently than from a sense of fear.

Kelly Bronwell:

David, you mentioned as well that anti-government sentiment is at the root of some of these extreme acts. Could you explain a little bit more about the sentiment that underlies that point of view?

David Chancer:

Well, sure. I think that's in the American DNA in many ways to have this individualistic, almost libertarian sense of rights. And there are people who truly believe in that, and they go as far as to challenging the authority of either the federal government, in some instances, or even state and local law enforcement to that they don't have any legitimacy, and it runs the gamut.

But I think in modern context in the recent years, a lot of it flows from some of the economic trends in the United States and globalization. Fear among some that their way of life is being threatened by outsiders, by large-scale immigration. We know we've had very flat wages and a real crunch on the middle and lower-middle classes in the last decade, especially since the economic recession of 2008 and onward. And there's a sense of for them that this way of life is slipping away. And frankly, it is also allied with some racism, and anti-immigrant sentiment that I think comes about by the idea that the United States is becoming a majority-minority nation and will become that sometime in the next century. And that is very threatening to people who have deep in their bones these racial views that are really out of step with the vast majority of society today.

Kelly Bronwell:

If we think about the actions that might likely occur in the United States or have occurred thus far, are we talking more about organized groups of people, or are we talking about individuals who carry out acts?

David Chancer:

Yeah. The organized groups, I think, is something that we saw a lot of in the sixties and seventies, really, whether it be oppositional groups like The Weather Underground or racist groups like the KKK, but I think our law enforcement, our surveillance, and also, I think our community perspective is such that it's much harder for these groups. They can organize, and they can have websites and share ideas. And, of course, that's their first amendment right to do so. But a, they're not as interested in violence because, a lot of people just aren't willing to go to jail for these things anymore. And second of all, they'll probably be ratted out by the people around them or if somebody, and so it's very hard for these groups to engage in organized violence.

And likewise on the Al-Qaeda ISIS side, really exclusively since 9/11, we have individuals while they may have been inspired, in some way, or they may have traveled abroad and gotten some instructions from an organized group, or they might've had an email or Twitter account with an extremist outside the US it's really been ones, twos, maybe three people conspiring together and engaging in something like the Boston Marathon rather than a group activity. I think that's because our enforcement or the FBI is really is on the job. They missed 9/11, but they've really been very diligent and effective since then. And I think people tend to, when they talk about things, they get caught, and we stop things before they happen.

Kelly Bronwell:

So in a companion podcasts that we'll do this one, we'll talk about some creative ideas that you have about ways that some of the effects might be prevented. But before we do that, and I'd like to ask one final question, what is the country's response now to dealing with these actions? You mentioned surveillance by the law enforcement agencies, helping prevent some of these things. What else has been done on the national scene that people may not want to know about?

David Chancer:

Well, we have a variety of tools at our disposal that fall under this big umbrella of counter-terrorism. And I think though it's really important to look at and have strategies for dealing with different problems and the roots of them, because they aren't all linked. We can't just say, well, here's our counter-terrorism policy, because as we've discussed, the routes and the grievances with respect to anti-government extremists are much different from Al-Qaeda and ISIS inspired. So with respect to these ideologies from abroad that can leak violence into the US, we need a real global strategy. It is appropriate to use a military force to some extent against these organizations, the extent that we can make them hold territory. They can; that we know where they are. We've used drone strikes pretty effectively to eliminate their leadership and make it more difficult for them to operate and plan attacks.

So military and foreign policy is deeply ingrained there. Here at home, we have domestic surveillance laws that have to comply with a pretty tough constitutional standard under both the first and the fourth amendment. But that doesn't mean that we can't still use those authorities, criminal law enforcement. And then we have the notion I was referring to before, in some ways, see something, say something, and the more, the further underground these individuals get pushed and the less connectivity they have with society so that surveillance might not really do the trick. The more we are going to rely on individuals and communities to, in some ways, police themselves. And that's where the idea of community activism and seeing something and saying something when they think something has gone to amiss comes into play.

Kelly Bronwell:

Good. Well, thank you very much. Our guest today was David Chancer, Associate Professor of the Practice at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University and Director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security.