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Between Radicalization and Violence

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Guest post by [Yelena Biberman](#) and [Gage Willand](#).



Scene from near the Pulse Night Club in Orlando in the wake of last week's shooting. Photo by [Adam Y Zhang](#).

Why do people kill in the name of an idea? The carnage in Orlando is a reminder that lone wolves pose a serious threat to our security. The question of whether

Omar Mateen's violence was a product of [radicalization](#) (the process of developing politically or religiously extreme beliefs) or mental instability will be debated in the weeks to come. Meanwhile, we searched for a common thread in the memoirs of seven violent radicals (individuals who chose to use violence for seemingly extreme political ends) from very different backgrounds. What we found was that ideology is not enough to make a person engage in acts of violence. One must also be [convinced](#) that violence is the best response to societal ills and that his or her individual actions can make a difference.

Many cultures have produced violent radicals. We analyzed the personal accounts of seven: [Vera Figner](#) (a Russian revolutionary who helped to plan the assassination of Tsar Alexander II), [Ingo Hasselbach](#) (a German Neo-Nazi operating in the late 1980s and early 1990s), [Pierre Vallières](#) (a leader of the Front de libération du Québec, a Quebecois left-wing separatist group operating in the 1960s), [Naim Qassem](#) (a founding member of Hezbollah), Salah Khalaf aka [Abu Iyad](#) (a founding member of Fatah, a Palestinian political organization), [Ya'akov Meridor](#) (a high-ranking member of Irgun, a Jewish Zionist paramilitary group operating in the 1930s and 1940s), and [Bildad Kaggia](#) (a leader of the Kenyan nationalist Mau Mau movement and politician in the Kenya African National Union).

All of these individuals felt politically or economically slighted, persecuted, or discriminated against. Hasselbach, Vallières, and Figner hated the German, Canadian, and Russian governments, respectively, for their violence and economic injustices. Meridor, Qassem, Khalaf, and Kaggia resented British and Israeli occupations for similar reasons. Khalaf was beaten by the British police in Mandate Palestine, while Kaggia was denied a decent salary because of his race. They felt wronged even when they were not targeted personally. Figner was angry at the plight of the peasants and servants she knew.

Second, all of these radicals were inspired by their mentors or models to believe that their actions would have important consequences. Hasselbach did not become a Neo-Nazi until he met Neo-Nazis in prison. Vallières was stirred by the writings of Karl Marx and a biography of Marie Curie, as well as the communists he met through his father. Qassem had contact with Islamic thinkers who inspired Hezbollah. Khalaf, who had earned a philosophy degree, recounts reading Marxist literature and being influenced by Mao Zedong; he imagined the Palestinian people "armed, returning to their country to drive out the usurpers." Kaggia and his fellow Kenyans were always told that Africans "weren't fit to be commissioned." Yet, after a group of Kenyan soldiers forced British officers to cede to it, he realized that it was "possible for soldiers to dictate to the officers."

Third, all of the seven radicals believed that nonviolence was insufficient for achieving their goals. Vallières thought that revolutionary change "cannot be

accomplished without war.” Figner observed: “When the youth turned to the people with peaceful propaganda, the government met them with wholesale arrests, exile, penal servitude, and central prisons.”

Radical ideas alone do not cause violent behavior. Without a grievance, there is no reason to fight. Even Hasselbach, who fought to subjugate minorities in Germany, saw himself as “a victim of the Communist regime.” The belief that individual action has meaningful consequences is also necessary. Both Kaggia and Vallières noted periods in their life when they felt powerless against greater social forces - feelings they had to overcome before taking political action. Finally, the conviction that violence can succeed where nonviolence fails is another important source of motivation for violent radicals. Vallières believed that “revolutionary violence” was the only way to “oppose the organized violence of imperialism and its local representatives.”

We may not be able to always prevent lone wolves from causing massive casualties, but we can control whether the attacks achieve their desired goals. Consequently, as more information becomes available, we should pay close attention to what Mateen’s goals were and what we can do, individually and collectively, to resist their realization.

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#Abu Iyad #Bildad Kaggia #Britain #Canada #Fatah #Germany #Hezbollah #Ingo Hasselbach #Irgun #Israel #Karl Marx #Kenya #Mao Zedong #Marie Currie #Mau Mau #Naim Qassem #Neo-Nazis #Omar Mateen #Palestine #Pierre Vallieres #Quebec #Russia #Salah Khalaf #Tsar Alexander II #Vera Figner #Ya'akov Meridor

