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INTRODUCTION

The supposed “radicalization” of Muslim youth has become a dominant national security focus, often described as the greatest form of violent extremism facing Canada today. National security narratives have adopted a particular “radicalization” framework that locates the root cause of terrorism in Islam (Kundani 2016) and sees Muslim youth as culturally programmed to carry out violence and destruction (Kumar 2012). These narratives have been solidified by certain events, including the 2006 Toronto 18 case when Muslim youth were arrested for allegedly planning a terrorist attack, reports that some are leaving Canada to become freedom fighters, and the 2014 shooting on Parliament Hill. The ensuing government strategy, rather than focusing on a few individuals, has legitimated and rationalized the surveillance of entire Muslim communities. With relatively few counter-representations of Muslims as normal law-abiding citizens in Western societies, narratives of Muslims as terrorists and misogynists have become a definitive, institutionalized assumption (Selod 2018, 23). These racial logics operate as facts around which policies and practices are framed and money is allocated.

The government of Canada has invested heavily in programs countering violent extremism (CVE). In 2016, 35 million dollars was allocated over five years for a new Community Outreach and Counter “Radicalization” Co-ordinator Office (Bell 2016). This led to the formation of the Canadian Center for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence in 2017. Operating under the oversight of Public Safety Canada, this center was tasked with spearheading the federal government’s efforts to counter “radicalization” through policy guidance, by promoting coordination, funding research, and supporting interventions (Public Safety Canada 2022).

Many Canadian cities have their own CVE programs. Calgary’s Redirect Program, created in 2014, is led by Calgary Police Services in partnership with the City of Calgary Community and Neighborhood Services (Redirect 2022). Redirect focuses on early intervention, purportedly before the process of “radicalization” occurs, relying on community partners to identify those at risk of being swayed by radical religious or political ideologies (CBC 2017). Redirect’s 2018-19 budget was 4.4 million dollars (CBC 2017). Other Canadian cities have implemented similar programs involving partnerships with municipal police and community organizations. Montreal’s Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence was launched in 2015; Edmonton has Evolve, and Toronto has Focus Toronto (Centre for the Prevention of “Radicalization” 2022; Wakefield 2021; Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada 2018).

Some Muslim communities have opted to create CVE programs as well. In 2016, the Canadian Council of Imams announced the formation of “deradicalization clinics” in Toronto;
these would be located in community centers and oriented towards community members involved in “violent extremism”. Imam Hamid Slimi stated, “We need to take action because this is a growing problem worldwide. And at least we want to create a successful model” (Bell 2016, para. 3). According to Slimi, the clinics would take a holistic approach by including mental health experts, academics, and theologians. These partnerships between Muslim community leaders and government are now seen as paramount to curbing “radicalization,” as Muslim leaders are imagined to have the ability to isolate “extremists” and prevent such ideas from spreading (Kundani 2015). The intentions may be good, but the creation of “deradicalization” clinics by Muslim communities legitimatizes and reinforces the racist narratives and intervention strategies employed by the state (Nguyen 2019).

Despite the widespread use of “radicalization” models by state security agencies and the emergence of “deradicalization” programs throughout Canada, there is limited research on how Muslim communities have reacted. We draw on 95 interviews with Muslim community leaders throughout Canada to probe the impact of “radicalization” ideologies on Muslim communities. These interviews were conducted in 2014-15, a time when the sensationalism surrounding the “radicalization” of Muslim youth was at its peak. The interviews captured how Muslim community leaders were responding to Muslim youth being scrutinized in media and political discourse. We found they responded to the idea of “radicalization” in complex ways. Some leaders dismissed the notion of “radicalization” and viewed it as a governmental strategy to continue mass surveillance and policing of Muslim youth. Others acknowledged “radicalization” in their communities but attempted to assert a different framework that challenged the attribution of blame to Islam and their communities. Several positioned themselves and Islam as the “solution” to “radicalization.”

We begin this paper with a review of the critical race literature to illustrate how the “radicalization” model emerged to justify the “War on Terror.” We then divide our findings into two main sections. First, we explore how mainstream perceptions and “radicalization” narratives impact Muslim youth and their communities. Second, we examine Muslim communities’ complex response to “radicalization” narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The framework of “extremism” adopted by intelligence services in Western countries was the product of the “War on Terror” but also the result of pre-existing Islamophobia and racial narratives about the Muslim “other,” mobilized and amplified to position Muslims as a threat to Western civilization (Razack 2008; Nagra 2017). The rhetoric surrounding counter-terrorism and “radicalization” targeted and demonized entire Muslim populations who became “imagined” as incubators of extremism. The myth that the root causes of “extremism” were located in Islamic religion and cultural practices rationalized the categorical suspicion of entire Muslim communities.

In Canada, the particular framing of “radicalization” within the state security system turned attention to the enemy within and launched counter-terrorism strategies so extreme in scope that they justified a broad framework wherein Muslim identity was set on a continuum of “suspicious” categories. Deepa Kumar writes, “When the United States goes to war against a foreign enemy, it inevitably makes war on the perceived enemy within to win consent for an imperial agenda though a process that orchestrates fear of the enemy within and pre-empts criticism of empire building” (Kumar 2012, 158). Similarly, in Canada, counter-terrorism strategies targeted Muslim communities for extra scrutiny, including Canada’s No-Fly List (Nagra and Maurutto 2020), the freezing of Muslim charitable assets, and excessive monitoring of Muslim Student Associations, mosques, and refugee claimants by CSIS (Canadian Security
Intelligence Services) and other law enforcement agencies (Kanji and McSorley 2021). Consequently, the surveillance, containment, and prosecution of Muslim individuals intensified (Ahmad 2020).

Within security agencies, the “radicalization” model is a predictive framework that claims to identify not who is a terrorist now but, rather, who might become a terrorist (Kundani 2015). It incorporates a range of predictors, or presumptions, about the characteristics placing individuals at risk of “radicalization” and extremism. The model calls for state security agencies to intervene in the early stages of the “radicalization” process before terrorist activity can occur (Kundani 2015).

The “radicalization” model emerged at the end of the first decade of the 21st century and became the primary lens through which state security agencies viewed Muslim communities in Western societies (Kumar 2012; Kundani 2016). The home-grown terrorist was not an immediate concern. Immediately following September 11, the “War on Terror” focused on external threats, with the military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq becoming the point of attack (Walby and Hier 2009). However, following the 2004 and 2005 attacks in Europe committed by citizens of the West, the “War on Terror” broadened its focus to include domestic threats (Kubicek and King 2021). In Canada, this was intensified by the 2006 Toronto 18 case where CSIS was later accused of entrapment because of its use of informants (Teotonio 2010). This incident directed attention to homegrown violent extremism. In 2008, the RCMP was directed to research international Prevent programs, specifically the UK’s Prevent model to reverse “radicalization” and prevent youth from being lured into extremism (Kubicek and King 2021). The Kanishka project, launched in 2011, allocated government funding to terrorism-related studies, stimulating academic research and funding over 70 studies. In 2012, the Building Resilience against Terrorism: Canada’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy was released. This report laid the foundation for “deradicalization” programs and government investment in CVE research (Kubicek and King 2021).

A common thread running through all measures and reports was the identification of “Islamic extremism” as the central policy focus. Muslims living in Western countries, including those born and raised there, were increasingly imagined as an immediate and serious threat to the state (Selod 2018). “Radicalization” became ingrained in security discourses and planning, and security forces were directed to root out the internal “Muslim extremist” threat.

By 2014, concerns about “foreign fighters” propelled the “radicalization” of Muslim youth into the national spotlight. In October 2015, CSIS hosted a workshop where it was argued that foreign fighters constituted an imminent threat (Government of Canada 2016). Emerging reports, such as by Anzalone (2015), speculated Muslim youth were influenced by media narratives of “jihadi” groups, with approximately 30 Canadians reported to have joined “extremist” groups in Syria and Iraq. A few years later, Matthews (2018) called for the Canadian government to prosecute returning “foreign fighters.” According to him, Canada was failing the victims of ISIS by allowing those who had committed egregious human rights violations to return. The moral panic surrounding the “radicalization” of Muslim youth was amplified on October 22, 2014, when Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, a white convert to Islam with a history of mental illness and substance abuse, stormed Parliament and killed a soldier (Solomon 2014). The Canadian media and political discussions of “foreign fighters,” along with international claims, underlined “radicalization” as the product of Islam.

By the same token, in the US, Ackerman (2011) found that at the FBI’s training centre in Quantico, Virginia, training material included a chart indicating the more devout a Muslim is, the more likely s/he is to be violent. And Alimahomed-Wilson’s (2019) study of 113 cases of FBI contact with Muslims living in Los Angeles discovered the most persistent questions asked by FBI agents concerned religious practices and community affiliations. In the Canadian
context, CSIS produced a number of reports on “Islamic radicalization” and “extremism,” including “Radicalization of Canadian Muslims” and “A Study of Radicalization: The Making of Islamic Extremists in Canada Today” (Monaghan 2014). While the RCMP has claimed their approach to “radicalization” is non-discriminatory, Monaghan and Molnar (2016) found training workshops disproportionately represent Islam as a violent enemy of the West, thus legitimizing the systematic targeting of Muslim communities.

The “radicalization” model has been criticized on a number of fronts. First, it is conceptually flawed, with no reliable evidence demonstrating a relationship between practicing Islam and committing acts of terrorist violence (Kundani 2015; Ahmad and Monaghan 2019). Silva writes, “Theories of ‘radicalization’ fail to adequately demonstrate the causal link between theology and violence which lies at the heart of so-called radicalisation models” (2018, 37). The concept of “radicalization” also lacks a clear definition (Ahmad and Monaghan 2019). Sedgwick argues that “radicalization” is broadly used to describe “what goes on before the bomb goes off” (2010, 479). Important questions remain about where the line is drawn between “moderate” and “radical” or who gets to draw it (Sedgwick 2010). Moreover, imposing the label “radicalized” may have its own consequences. Sedgwick writes, “A group that is labelled as radical and thus excluded from normal public and political processes, may as a result, be more likely to actually become radical in security terms, since exclusion, from normal processes encourages a search for alternative processes” (2010, 491).

Despite these problems, the “radicalization” model continues to inform counter-terrorism practices that shape anti-Muslim surveillance. According to Monaghan (2014), the “radicalization” model is a security trap – a tool to justify the expansion of the security agenda and the ongoing allocation of resources in the “War on Terror.” He notes that between 2001 and 2009, the Canadian Public Security and Anti-Terrorism (PSAT) initiative allocated $12.9 billion to 35 departments and agencies. Similarly, Selod (2018) claims that racializing a Muslim body as a potential terrorist is both a precondition for and a necessary step in the maintenance of the surveillance industry. Surveillance is now a multi-billion-dollar industry world-wide (Sharma and Nijjar 2018; Selod 2018). No longer an affair of intelligence and police services, it has become a political project that is changing the balance of power between the executive, judiciary, and legislature (Sharma and Nijjar 2018).

Academic research mirrors state efforts to find “radicalization” indicators (Monaghan and Molnar 2016). One set of literature focuses on mapping the “radicalization” process. Sabic-El-Rayess (2021) proposes a ten-step model through which ordinary citizens transform into “radicalised” actors through exposure to Salafism, a branch of Sunni Islam. Doosje et al. (2016) propose a three-model “radicalization” phase. Another set of literature attempts to identify factors leading to radicalization. Studies show how self-image coupled with “radical” Islam can lead to “radicalization” (Drouin 2020), how universities can function as incubators for “radicalization” (Al-Badayneh 2011), and how social media (Tikhonov 2018; Kadivar 2017; Windsor 2020) and prisons can contribute to “radicalization” (Vaysov 2018; King et al. 2021). A third set of literature explores how to prevent “radicalization.” Studies have explored the role of Islamic chaplains (Vellenga and De Groot 2019) and school workers can play in detection and prevention (Beršnak and Iztok 2020). Others suggest what parents can do to curb the development of “extreme ideology” (Sikkens et al. 2018).

State security agencies have used academic studies to legitimize the “radicalization” model despite its flaws. Silva says both Canada and the UK “have explicitly relied on the academic community to inform their counter radicalisation strategies” (2018, 35). He points out that government officials are very selective of which scholarly knowledge they adopt and which they overlook. He finds state agencies rely on academic studies that focus on “radicalization” as
a cultural, psychological, and religious disposition to develop indicator models despite the criticism of such studies. The government tends to ignore academic work that is critical of the state and highlights the disproportionate targeting of Muslim communities. According to Silva (2018), government agencies legitimize a body of empirically questionable research, while simultaneously justifying their own counter-“radicalization” interventions. This naturally results in discriminatory social policies (Silva 2018).

Domestic “radicalization” narratives are informed by and support the “War on Terror.” The narrative of “radicalization” contributes to and is embedded within a rhetoric that obscures the role of Western governments in creating terrorist violence (Nguyen 2019). It supports racist assumptions of Muslims as predisposed to terrorism and extremism, thereby legitimating the “War on Terror” (Cainkar 2018). The “War on Terror” cements colonial and racial projects in Western nations, relies on centuries-old vilification of Islam, and legitimates and enables the consolidation of a “radicalization” narrative where Muslim identity is envisioned as predisposed to extremism (Kundani 2016).

We argue the production of a “radicalization” framework is itself an ideology perpetuating the “War on Terror.” We do not deny that a small minority of youth are drawn to “extremism”. However, the rhetoric of “radicalization,” as our interviews show, is part of an ideology that allows the state to engage in widespread racial profiling and surveillance, leading to the erosion of rights and “othering” of Muslim youth. As Zine notes, 9/11 and the “War on Terror” have “created a landscape of violence that is the inheritance of young Muslims whose lives are shaped within and against these crises” (2022, 6). She argues the majority of Muslim youth are “forced to bear the burden and repercussions of collective responsibility for the actions of a few” (Zine 2022, 7).

In this paper, we contribute to the literature critical of the concept of “radicalization” (Silva 2018; Kundani 2015; Ahmad and Monaghan 2019; Sedgwick 2010; Selod 2018) by exploring its impact on Muslim communities. As community leaders are often asked by state security agencies to act as intermediaries to curb “radicalization”, we examine how Muslim community leaders internalize and manage narratives of “radicalization”.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study was based on 95 interviews in 2014-15 with Muslim community leaders across five major Canadian cities: Toronto (26 interviews), Ottawa (20), Montreal (15), Calgary (18), and Vancouver (16). These cities have large Muslim populations (Statistics Canada 2017). Community leaders were identified as those who could speak to their community’s experiences with CSIS and included those with official and prominent roles, such as Imams and executive members of Muslim organizations, and those active in other capacities, such as members of women’s and youth organizations, academics, lawyers, and political activists.

The sample was 70 percent male and 30 percent female, aged 23 to 74, with an average age of 45. The goal was a sample equally representative of both genders, but leadership positions in Muslim organizations are more often held by men. Ninety-one percent were Canadian citizens; the rest were permanent residents. Interviewees represented the diversity of Canadian Muslim communities: Indian, Pakistani, Turkish, Nigerian, Somali, Algerian, Tunisian, Egyptian, Syrian, Bosnian, Lebanese, Iranian, Saudi Arabian, Palestinian, Libyan, Bangladeshi, Fijian, Sri Lankan.

Interviewees were recruited through both purposive sampling (intentional selection of interviewees based on their knowledge of the phenomenon studied) and snowball sampling (participants were asked to identify other potential participants). Interviews lasted
approximately one hour; they were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded thematically, and analyzed using the N-VIVO qualitative software program.

**FINDINGS**

Overall, there was a strong sentiment that, when it comes to monitoring Muslim youth, the Canadian state is discriminatory, excessive, blunt, and obstructive. Interviewees were critical of government and CSIS practices conflating Islam with terrorism. Many said this conflation allows innocent Muslim youth to be targeted, particularly those who attend mosques or who are involved in cultural or Muslim student organizations. They argued structural surveillance impacts the daily lives of Muslim youth in multiple ways. Interviewees described a hyper-surveillance causing youth to be afraid of displaying their Muslim identity and associating with Islam publicly. They said youth are fearful of attending Friday prayers, becoming members of Muslim student associations (MSA), and attending mosques.

By and large, interviewees dismissed mainstream narratives identifying Islam as the root cause of “radicalism”; they advanced counter-narratives locating extremism within individual psychological circumstances, discriminatory state practices, and social media. Yet some were concerned that “radicalization” could take hold within their families and communities; some even suspected their children of “radicalization.” A few offered “solutions” to “radicalization”; they argued the teaching of Islam and the establishment of stronger Muslim communities constituted ideal practice for CVE programming. These individuals were willing to work alongside state actors to root out “radicalization” in their communities.

**MAINSTREAM “RADICALIZATION” NARRATIVES AND TARGETING MUSLIM YOUTH**

A common concern of interviewees was the excessive questioning and monitoring of Muslim youth by CSIS and the RCMP. One commented, “Parents are very concerned about their youth. Not because their youth are ‘radicalized’ but because they are worried that if their child goes to an MSA event they will be spied on” (Toronto 1). Such fears stemmed from actual experiences of Muslim youth. An interviewee said:

> Almost seven youth have told me, “We have been approached by CSIS, we’ve been approached by RCMP. … And we were asked to come and talk to them.” And these are normal people who do not have extremist ideas. These people are (just) living their lives and they are targeted by CSIS. (Ottawa 15)

Interviewees also told us they are frequently questioned by CSIS about Muslim youth: “I’ve had CSIS come and visit me and the sole purpose of that meeting was for them to determine whether or not there were any (radicalized) youth groups” (Vancouver 7). CSIS and the RCMP were critiqued for categorizing any youth associated with Muslim religious or cultural organizations as “at risk” for “radicalization.”

The impact of “radicalization” and security surveillance was identified as extreme and as undermining civil liberties. Interviewees said youth are prohibited from travelling because state security agencies claim they are going to join ISIS or other terrorist entities. They mentioned several cases when Muslim youth who arrived at the airport for departure were told they would not be able to board their flights. A Toronto Imam said Somali Muslim youth are regularly turned back from Toronto Pearson, even when travelling with their families, because
CBSA officials fear they are joining an overseas conflict. These findings echo Thompson and Bucerius’ (2020) study that found Somali Canadians report increased scrutiny and racial profiling at border crossings. Another Muslim leader commented:

The problem is that more and more RCMP agents, they are identifying these kids and stopping them at the border before they board their flights, because; you want to go to Syria? If you’re a threat, you should belong in jail? Do you have any evidence that this kid wants to partake an act of violence in Syria? If the answer is no, you let them go. (Montreal 13)

In addition, passports are regularly confiscated. One interviewee mentioned: “I know there are three or four families personally, where the RCMP has taken away their passports” (Calgary 11). Another talked about a Muslim youth who had his passport confiscated when he attempted to travel to Iraq to visit his grandparents:

This one boy, he’s a young fellow, he was going for the summer back to Iraq where his grandparents are from. They stopped him on his journey there and said, “You’re going there to fight with ISIS.” That’s what they suspected. He said, “No, I’m just going there to visit my grandparents” … Then they started questioning him and took his passport away. They said, “No, you cannot travel.” There was nothing other than this kid being very involved in the Muslim community in Calgary. They just took his (passport), just because they didn’t like the way he answered a question or because they just suspected. That’s it. There are a lot of genuine kids that are getting caught up in this and their passports are being taken away, and they are not allowed to fly. Then they have to hire a lawyer, spend a ton of money to just get your passport released. (Calgary 10)

The confiscating of passports this way was rightly viewed as unlawful and unjust. A pattern emerged in our interviews whereby youth active in their communities who want to travel to locations such as Syria or Iraq are frequently denied travel. No concrete evidence is required. The fear of Canadian youth going overseas to become foreign fighters was elevated, particularly during the time of our interviews, to a national priority. Interviewees generally thought “radicalization” narratives were being used to justify extreme state practices, resulting in the erosion of the rights of Muslim youth.

Our interviewees indicated that the pervasiveness of “radicalization” narratives extends beyond state security. These have become a societal norm; even teachers buy into them and try to root out potential “Muslim extremists.” One of our interviewees said his 14-year-old son was reported to the RCMP by his teacher after a class discussion on Bin Laden. His son had disagreed with the teacher about Bin Laden’s motivations for attacking the US. The teacher reported him, and the RCMP came to school to interview him. This interviewee said:

I actually went with my son to the meeting, and I said maybe the RCMP will recognize me as a member of the community and listen to me. And they said, “No, no, it is not your job. You stay outside and we will just question your son, right?” And I think after a half an hour time, this officer, do you know what he said to me? “There is no problem but when we have new information we have to check it, right?” (Toronto 4)

This was not an isolated story. Many parents feared their children could be identified by teachers as extremists. They felt powerless – unable to protect children from interrogation.
Educational institutions, ostensibly a safe space for students, have become sites of surveillance, with teachers looking for suspicious Muslim youth. In documenting official CVE programs in Quebec’s education sector, Millett and Ahmad (2021) find that when appointed the responsibility to detect “radicalization”, teachers rely on stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, resulting in heightened surveillance. While some provinces, including Ontario, have no official mandate for identifying “radicalization” in the educational system, our findings suggest it is happening unofficially.

Sadly, the “radicalization” narratives also shape suspicion within some families. We were told of Muslim families who feared their children’s behaviour indicated “radicalization.” In some cases, families had become so anxious that they started monitoring their own children:

In my mosques, one woman came to my office and told me about her boy who is 20 now. She started to think he has a radical discourse. So they go after him, to the computer to see which website he sees, and they find he like deletes all the history. So they think he is up to something. She told me, “What do I have to do now? I don’t know what to do? Maybe my son wants to go to Iraq or Syria? Maybe? I don’t know, but maybe. What do I have to do? What is the procedure?” (Montreal 11)

By buying into the “radicalization” narrative, some families have begun fearing the worst of their own youth. Something as vague as deleting an internet history could be interpreted as a plan to leave for Syria.

Some community leaders were concerned that other leaders within their communities had bought into “radicalization” narratives and were actively encouraging Muslim families to report “suspicious” behavior to police, with dire consequences for Muslim youth:

There were these two Muslim youth who wanted to go join the caliphate (a land governed under Islamic rule) and with no intention whatsoever to partake in armed conflict. They just wanted to go and live there, with Muslims and live in a very, very regular Muslim way. The sister of one of these two kids heard them and was really scared of losing her brother. So what did she do? She went to see an Imam who said, “Yeah, you should contact the RCMP. They have resources to help you in these specific cases.” So what did she do? She called the RCMP. So what does the RCMP do? They take a warrant to search his apartment. They find nails, batteries, sugar. A bunch of stuff that you can find in every house and then they break into his parent’s house and they find a pressure cooker. Something a lot of people have. So they say, “We got all the elements here to make a bomb”. They arrest him for conspiracy to commit a terrorist plot in Syria against the Canadian government. That’s what she gets for helping out. That’s what she gets for calling the police and voicing a true concern. (Montreal 13)

This speaks to how “radicalization” frameworks transform normal activities into indicators of extremism that legitimate detention with the complicity of some within Muslim communities.

Some community leaders said they repeatedly informed youth that they would report any indication of “radicalization” to law enforcement:

We tell our youth listen, and we have a very zero tolerance policy. Anybody that is caught organizing or talking about recruiting or terrorism, you will be barred from coming. You will be reported to the RCMP and CSIS right away we’ll just hand you over. (Vancouver 12)
Ultimately, Muslim youth have a double burden. Jamil (2016) argues that Muslim youth, who already face racism and exclusion, now have to prove they are not “radicalizing.” Our research suggests youth must repeatedly demonstrate their lack of “radicalization,” not only to state security agencies, but also, at times, to their families and communities.

**THE PARADOX OF “RADICALIZATION” NARRATIVES WITHIN MUSLIM COMMUNITIES**

The response to “radicalization” narratives within Muslim communities was not uniform, but we noted two main responses. Many interviewees were critical of the way the state targets and surveils Muslim youth; they rejected “radicalization” narratives outright. Others challenged narratives associating Islam with extremism, but thought “radicalization” was a concern in their communities. These latter interviewees were actively seeking to shift “radicalization” narratives, with some positioning themselves and mosques as the solution to “radicalization.”

Those who totally rejected “radicalization” narratives said, “It’s propaganda and nothing else” (Montreal 4). Another interviewee noted:

They’re just making something big out of nothing. I don’t think “radicalization” is a problem. I have never witnessed “radicalization” cases. I have never witnessed people and I’m active in mosques. So it’s not what the media or the politics would want us to think it is. I don’t think new legislations was needed, I don’t think it’s worth spending time and money on it for a few cases. It’s just a political game; it’s just that. (Montreal 6)

These interviewees were critical of CVE “deradicalization” programs. One told us:

The Calgary police developed a new program called ReDirect that’s supposed to be preventing extremism. I have a good friend who is in that program. She’s a social worker, a Muslim, and she told me the assessment criteria they use and it’s very much racial profiling. And I met with the organizer, they said, “Don’t worry, it won’t be racially profiling”, but it is. They use things like stereotypical backgrounds, like Arab or South Asian. Another criteria is religiosity. These programs are trying to create like a cookie cutter template for “radicalization” but it’s not that simple. Just because I start delving into Islam and start learning Arabic and start dressing like a Muslim, it doesn’t mean that I am going on this path. (Calgary 2)

For these interviewees, CVE programs are just another facet of the “War on Terror,” with racist knowledge used to legitimate the policing of Muslim communities. Everyday practices such as learning Arabic are interpreted as markers of “radicalization,” justifying racial profiling.

These individuals cautioned against association or partnerships with the state. They recognized the coercive effects of state policing. One interviewee, a Muslim lawyer active in his community, said:

I strongly recommend every person out there to never talk to the police. Everything that you say may be used against you, even if you’re not being detained or being arrested. So I always say that to my community, “Never talk to the police, never talk to CSIS. (Montreal 13)
This group of interviewees said any engagement with law enforcement would intensify racial profiling and the erosion of rights, and community leaders who participated in CVE programs were being co-opted by the state.

Others accepted that “radicalization” might be occurring among Muslim youth, but they challenged the framing of state “radicalization” narratives associating Islam with extremism. Their comments on “radicalization” were very strategic. Some said “radicalization” was occurring but not in their communities or their mosques. One reported: “I think it’s funny that the mosques are being kind of focused on but if you look at how ‘radicalization’ is happening it’s not in mosques anymore. It’s totally not” (Calgary 2). Another said:

It’s not anything happening inside of the Masjids. It’s not something that they need to be targeting here, they need to be looking for these people in other places. They’re just wasting their time pretty much, coming here and looking for people here because I’ve never met a single person in the Masjids or anywhere even that I could say, “You guys need to go after this guy, right”. (Calgary 08)

In addition, Imams rejected the pretext that they or other religious leaders were preaching radical ideology. A prominent Toronto Iman said:

Every week there are sermons given across Canada. There is a million of them. … If all Imams went to preach violence as alleged by some media, then Canada would not be the safe place as it is today. I mean it’s obvious that they are not preaching violence So look at it from that angle. (Toronto 2)

Some leaders advanced alternative explanations for the cause of “radicalization,” pointing to individual psychological factors and trauma, state practices, and social media. They explained trauma, mental illness, and discriminatory practices leading to isolation and exclusion could be “correlated” with extremism:

There is a series of events that may have happened, right? So family life is very rough. There may have been trauma, either here or overseas, not even war, but abuse of any kind, right? Mental illness as well. There may be a correlation with “radicalization,” right? So depression, anxiety, substance abuse. But some people have a greater genetic disposition. But we are not looking at that, right? (Calgary 3)

Mental health and trauma, coupled with discrimination, were identified as significant factors undermining stability and possibly leading to extremist positions.

Most of those who accepted some form of “radicalization” attributed it to state practices that unjustifiably target Muslim youth. Interviewees said exclusion, marginalization, and racial profiling make Muslim youth vulnerable to “radicalization.” One interviewee mentioned:

Western governments are pushing Muslim youth, not welcoming them and, not bringing them into mainstream Canadian society. It just creates a feeling of isolation, and fear. And, that’s why those young boys and girls are getting attracted by the terrorist organizations. Because until our government adopts a policy of inclusion, education, correctness, rehabilitation, this fight is not going to end. (Calgary 11)
Interviewees also identified counter-terrorism policies resulting in injustices around the world, particularly in the Middle East, as a source of “radicalization”:

If they don’t see their own government doing something about it, at least acknowledge atrocities that are happening around the world, if not assist in stopping wars, then definitely you are going to see some young Muslims who are going to watch all sorts of videos on YouTube and, basically, adopt all sorts of radical behavior. (Toronto 16)

For these interviewees, the bedrock of “radicalization” is the government’s “War on Terror” which inflicts violence abroad and deploys extreme measures against domestic communities.

The interviewees pointed to the role of social media in linking Islamophobia and “radicalization.” One interviewee said: “I have given workshops to RCMP on this too that the ‘radicalization’ is not through any mosque; it’s through internet and social media now that their Imam is the internet. Nowadays with social media a lot of recruitment is going on” (Toronto 2).

According to interviewees, Muslim youth fear going to mosques because of state surveillance, so they turn to social media for guidance on Islam:

When you tell kids you can’t go to the mosque anymore, if you go to the mosque you are going to be labelled; they are going to cause problems for you. And that prevents the youth from coming to the mosque. So what the youth do instead of basically getting the knowledge from the mosque—they will go online to these forums where “radicalization” happens. (Toronto 22)

The problem, interviewees said, is that social media present “distorted” and “wrong” understandings of Islam.

For these interviewees, the mosque and Muslim organizations are the solution to “radicalization,” not its source. According to them, mosques provide youth with the right guidance and grounding to mitigate against “extremism”. One Imam said:

I’ve told this to authorities: It’s not mainstream mosques that these individuals have attended. Most of them have attended their own circle of friends in their apartments or whatever. So they’re not really mosqued enough to reach them. I mean the mosques are part of the solution because they can offer theological guidance. (Ottawa 2)

Muslim community leaders also positioned themselves as the solution. A leader of a Muslim organization and Muslim youth counsellor claimed:

The policy of “radicalization” alone is ridiculous. How do you “deradicalize,” you don’t “deradicalize” people. “Deradicalization” basically means demotivation, to remove their motivation to do it. That’s almost impossible. What you have to do is repurpose people’s lives. You’ve got to stop using the word “deradicalization”, start using repurposing. But of course, it’s not fully understood. So I tell people we don’t “deradicalize,” we repurpose (Muslim youth). (Calgary 1)

An interviewee who ran an institute for Muslim youth said, “We believe that terrorism or security issues are the results of marginalization and unhealthy identity constructs. So through our work we are preventing future home-grown terrorism or even foreign fighters” (Calgary 5)
These interviewees were attempting to subvert prevailing “radicalization” tropes associating Islam with extremism and to reposition mosques, Imams, and Muslim leaders as agents of “deradicalization.” For these community leaders, CVE government-led programs reinforce a climate of Islamophobia perpetuating racist stereotypes. As the leader cited above remarked, “deradicalization” should be replaced by “repurposing.”

By presenting themselves as solutions to the problem of “radicalization”, Imams and community leaders could reposition themselves as allies of the state. They viewed themselves as key interlocutors with the knowledge and cultural understanding to address “radicalization.” As such, they attempted to move from being viewed as potential incubators of “radicalization” to essential security actors assisting the state. They may take this approach because they themselves are under constant state surveillance and feel the need to prove they are safe. But in so doing, they are aligning themselves with the state to gain legitimacy. One interviewee commented:

Many political leaders of our community feel if we don’t step up and apologize and sort of kiss the butt of CSIS we’ll become a target or a suspect or something so in order to allay suspicion or whatever they will do what they need to do to ingratiate themselves to CSIS. They have to corporate in a sense for the legitimacy of their organization, to keep it above board and above suspicion. (Ottawa 15)

However, community leaders’ participation in CVE and other “deradicalization” strategies reinforces the narratives they seek to disrupt. Zine (2022) uses the concept of “panopticon of self-surveillance” to explain how individuals, in our case Muslim leaders, internalize normalized regulatory frameworks and thus subject themselves and their communities to forms of policing. By agreeing to participate in government programs, Muslim communities are implicated in the policing of Muslim youth.

Both the state and Muslim communities control and monitor Muslim youth, giving credence to the notion that these youth should not be left to their own devices. Consequently, Muslim youth lose important freedoms. One interviewee said, “For our youth group, believe me, we’re adamant about their behavior. We close our mosques at midnight. We do not allow them to linger around, we do not allow them to have private meetings” (Vancouver 11). This speaks to the ways Muslim leaders themselves, while attempting to subvert “radicalization” narratives, engage in practices that reinforce and intensify regulation and policing. Muslim youth are categorized as “risky” not just in society but also within their own communities.

CONCLUSION

Our interviewees’ responses to “radicalization” narratives were complex. Most denounced the perception of Muslim communities as incubators of “radicalization.” State narratives were viewed as an unfounded legitimation of widespread discriminatory surveillance of Muslim communities. They voiced concerns about the excessive monitoring of Muslim youth for engaging in normative religious and cultural practices. The location of extremism within Islam was seen as legitimating state surveillance practices and reproducing narratives wherein all Muslim communities are suspect and potential enemies of the state.

That said, “radicalization” among Muslim youth was not outright rejected. Some community leaders strategically sought to advance an alternative counter-“radicalization” narrative. They attributed “radicalization” to unjust state policies that vilify and target their communities, psychological trauma, and extremist content on social media. They deflected the
locus of “radicalization” from within Islam to state practices embedded within the “War on Terror.” For our interviewees, the oppressive state practices that marked their communities for excessive surveillance pushed their youth to “radicalization.”

This reframing allowed some community leaders to position themselves as a “solution” to the problem of “radicalization.” In fact, Muslim community leaders viewed themselves as best-positioned to address extremism among youth. For them, the best defense was to help youth establish stronger community ties. In this way, they sought to disrupt the perception of their communities as “a potential threat” and present themselves as an asset to the security state and the ideal venue for countering “radicalization.”

By defining themselves as a “solution,” these community leaders were attempting to gain “national capital” (Hage 1998) by proving their legitimacy to the state through establishing partnerships with the state to offer CVE programs. They altered the discourse on the “radicalization” of Muslim youth to legitimize themselves and their organizations. In so doing, however, they legitimized the security narratives driving the “War on Terror” and stigmatizing their communities. According to Nguyen (2019), the recruitment of Muslim communities by the security state to counter violent extremism is a deceptive solution. We suggest those participating in Muslim-run “deradicalization” clinics become implicated in the policing of their own youth, furthering the harm inflicted on Muslim youth and acting as unwitting accomplices of the security state. While many have a genuine interest in addressing “threats” within their communities and helping their youth, their collaboration inadvertently contributes to Islamophobia and perpetuates state “radicalization” narratives. The nexus between Muslim community leaders and state policing agencies has dire consequences for Muslim youth and disrupts Muslim communities.

REFERENCES


