

Religious fundamentalism and radicalisation

SUMMARY

The recent terrorist attacks in Europe and the increasing number of European terrorist 'foreign fighters' highlight the need not only to reinforce the policy measures against radicalisation and religious fundamentalism but also to understand the processes of these two phenomena in the European context.

Radicalisation is a complex matter that has not been defined uniformly in the social sciences. It can be seen as a phenomenon of people embracing views which could lead to terrorism, and is closely connected to the notion of extremism. Religious fundamentalism, a belief in an absolute religious ideology with no tolerance for differing interpretations, is a contributing factor to the development of radical opinions.

Radicalisation is a dynamic process cutting across social and demographic strata. Recent studies seeking to understand it suggest of the need to profile the processes of recruitment, be it online or in places such as schools, mosques and prisons.

The causes of radicalisation are complex, drawing from the continuing conflicts in the Middle East, the disconnectedness of large Muslim communities living in Western societies and their search for identity. The process of recruitment occurs by way of extremist propaganda spread by terrorist organisations with roots abroad, but operating in Europe.

Radicalisation is a serious threat to internal security in EU Member States, who retain the main competence in this matter. The measures taken at EU level contribute to the fight against radicalisation by offering common strategies, EU-wide cooperation networks and coordination of Member States' efforts.



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Issue

The attacks in Paris in January 2015, followed by shootings in Copenhagen in February, mark a continuation of radical Islamist terrorist attacks in the West after 11 September 2001 in New York, 11 March 2004 in Madrid, and 7 July 2005 in London.

The attacks in Europe point to the need to fight a different kind of threat – the phenomenon of 'homegrown' radicalisation, i.e. radical Islam rooted in Western Europe, by way of extremists seeking to recruit young Muslims to help further their cause. Moreover, an increasing number of Europeans are going abroad to engage in Jihad, join Syrian opposition fighters or receive military training in conflict zones, with the possible consequence that they organise large-scale terrorist attacks on their return to Europe.

What is radicalisation, what is religious fundamentalism?

If radicalisation is to be considered as a phenomenon based on ideology and religious views, it is important to consider it together with religious fundamentalism, and to set both issues in a broader political, economic, social and intercultural context.

Radicalisation

The European Commission [defines](#) radicalisation as 'the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to terrorism'. A 2008 report by the Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation¹ suggests that radicalisation can be considered as socialisation to extremism, which may lead to terrorism. It follows that preventing radicalisation is an important element in counter-terrorist measures, to reduce the threat of radicalised individuals engaging in terrorist activity.

In social sciences, the term 'radicalisation' or 'radicalism' is not defined uniformly (with the latter used to mark legitimate opposition to mainstream political orientation with the intention to bring about reform). Moreover, in political discourse it is often used interchangeably with notions such as 'extremism'. Although these phenomena can be said to share the same objective – challenging the existing order – the objectives may be different. One interpretation² is that while radicalism seeks to modify the existing political and social structure, it need not be violent, hence the adjective 'violent' is often added. 'Extremism' is associated with active adoption of an ideology, intending to deliberately apply violence to remove a state's structure and its elite. Another approach defines radicalism as a quest for sweeping change, while limiting extremism to the pursuit of concrete and localised political ideologies.³ The political aspect is also emphasised by Peter Neumann,⁴ who defines radicalisation as 'the process (or processes) whereby individuals or groups come to approve of and (ultimately) participate in the use of violence for political aims'.

Although academia is somewhat divided as to whether the process of radicalisation is an individual or collective one, the traditional view of radicals as mentally and socially vulnerable misfits has been challenged by more recent case studies.⁵ Instead, as described in the Commission's 2008 report, the current approach builds on socio-political contexts, the inter-relation of social structures and exposure to violence as factors contributing to the development of radical terrorists. Hence, radicalisation can be viewed as a phenomenon relying on a combination of global, sociological and political factors, and with ideological and psychological aspects.

Religious fundamentalism

Ideology forms an inseparable part of the radicalisation process. Nevertheless, it is suggested that ideology is not, alone, decisive but has to be complemented by other

factors – political and social environment, and a psychological need for identity. Using religion as a useful narrative, a cognitive framework is built on religious fundamentalism and other ideologies to create solidarity and increase loyalty to the cause.⁶ Religious fundamentalism, often at the heart of radicalisation, can be defined⁷ as a belief in an absolute religious truth which is challenged by the forces of evil and which must be followed today in the same way as in the past. It can be seen to rely on three attitudes:

- believers should go back to absolute and unchangeable rules established in the past,
- these rules allow for only one interpretation to be held among believers, and
- religious rules should prevail over secular ones.

It is worth noting that the term, originally applied to the Protestant revival movement in the early 1900s in the United States, is not unique to Islam but has been used to refer to similar movements within Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism (Koopmans, 2014).

Islamic fundamentalism stems from Salafism, a socio-political movement that emerged in Egypt in the 19th century within Sunni Islam, which opposed integration into mainstream Western European societies. Salafists believe that Muslims must return to the path of the Prophet and adhere literally to the Koran. Given their conservative religious lifestyle, all Salafists can be considered fundamentalists, but not all violent militants.⁸

Only Salafist Jihadism focuses on the use of violence to bring about radical change. The jihadists advocate the use of violence to create a new caliphate and win back territories once ruled by Muslims. Following their teachings, the jihadists reject religious pluralism and aspire to dominance of political Islam in the whole world.⁹ Nevertheless, as suggested by Lorenzo Vidino,¹⁰ the majority of Muslims living in Western countries can be considered more as 'cultural' or 'sociological' Muslims than religious ones. Regardless of this, organisations representing conservative Islamist views, as well as those promoting more extreme approaches, are expanding the ranks of their 'religious' followers in Europe and in the US.¹¹ In February 2015, in closing the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, US President, Barack Obama sharpened the focus on different strands of Islam, by [stating](#) that, '... we are not at war with Islam. We are at war with people who have perverted Islam'.

How and where does radicalisation occur?

Lack of specific profiles or triggers

A recent approach to radicalisation suggests seeing it as a dynamic and non-linear process. Because the motivations driving radicalisation are personal and psychological, recruitment cannot be viewed as a logical chain reaction. While there is no single, or even main, set of motivations, radicalisation appears to adhere to the 'normal' motivational variables.¹² The lack of a single profile makes a targeted response difficult although it is suggested that most young extremists fall into one of two categories: well-educated undergraduates and people with qualifications in engineering and IT, or school drop-outs, often with criminal backgrounds.¹³ But because these individuals have been activated either by socio-economic, psycho-social, ideological or political triggers, they cannot fit into a single prevention strategy. Therefore, profiling of dimensions, processes and pathways of radicalisation could be a more suitable approach.¹⁴

Role of social bonds

Radicalisation processes draw on social networks for joining and staying connected. Bonding of various types is essential but because trust is of utmost importance, preference falls on close networks based on friendship, kinship and ethnicity.¹⁵

Recruiters are often charismatic leaders who are able to exploit emotional triggers such as hatred, revenge and frustration. Moreover, direct contact with people who have fought in conflict zones in Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan or Iraq can have a powerful impact, with such fighters, as well as Al Qaeda figureheads, considered role models.¹⁶

Online

Propaganda is essential to legitimising extremist views, highlighting both real and imaginary grievances, magnifying the tensions between 'believers' and the 'enemy', and building a group identity. While the means used encompass video, audio recordings, books, magazines and speeches, the internet is nowadays the main tool.¹⁷

Social media in particular have gained ground as an efficient channel for recruitment and indoctrination. Since these channels provide easy access to a wide target audience, terrorist organisations, including Al Qaeda and its affiliates use YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media. They take advantage of the fact that, in contrast to traditional channels that required waiting for individuals to come to the terrorists, they can now reach out to their audience. Terrorist organisations can review the online profiles of their recruits and choose appropriate ways to approach individuals. The sites also allow them to use 'narrowcasting' to target their recruits.¹⁸

Governments have tried to eradicate this process through censorship and filtering, for instance on 15 March 2015 the French Government blocked five sites accused of containing jihadist propaganda. The measure has already been criticised, not only for lack of legitimacy as the administrative blocking is applied without prior recourse to justice, but also for ineffectiveness, because the sites blocked in France may re-appear at different addresses or different hosts outside France.¹⁹ A 2014 report focused on online extremism in UK and France suggests that negative measures such as censorship are not only ineffective and costly and even counter-productive, whereas positive measures such as publishing counter-extremist content and promoting the fight against radicalism are more effective in challenging extremist views.²⁰

While the use of internet for recruitment and propaganda is undeniable, it is argued that it should not be overestimated.²¹ It seems that most individuals have some sort of contact with extremism before becoming further indoctrinated online.

Schools and universities

Radicalisation in schools has been a concern for more than a decade. In 2004, the [Obin Report](#) submitted to the French Minister of Education revealed the spread and impact of 'islamisation' in French public schools and the resulting dangers to national cohesion.

The UK Government has addressed the issue in universities in its 'Prevent Strategy' review, with evidence of convicted radicals attending UK universities, some of them already holding extremist views before enrolling, others becoming radicalised during their studies. Some extremist organisations and radical preachers have been known to target specific universities, notably those with large numbers of Muslim students.²²

To highlight the fact that schools need more support in preventing intolerance and fighting radicalisation, a [Declaration](#) on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education was adopted on 17 March 2015 at the informal meeting of the EU's Education Ministers.

Mosques

According to a study conducted in 2007, mosques may be seen by the extremists as a 'legitimising space' for recruitment. Mosques attract extremist recruiters based on a

cost-benefit analysis, although religious community leaders opposed to violent extremism may hinder the process.²³ However, according to a 2009 report, Dutch officials now believe that, from 1997, imams in four Salafist mosques in the Netherlands allowed individuals known to be involved in international terrorism to frequent their premises and recruit followers.²⁴ Indeed, radical preachers such as Omar Bakri in Regent's Park Mosque (London), Abu Khaled in El-Tawheed (Amsterdam) and Mohammed Hammami in Omar Mosque (Paris) were able to spread their message to youngsters. Realising the threat, mosques try to push the extremists out, to avoid being labelled as radical. Some view mosques as prime locations for challenging extremist views and offering positive counter-narratives.²⁵ On the other hand, the UK Prevent Strategy [takes note](#) of the development whereby community resistance has made it difficult for radical preachers to operate openly and as a result has driven them to operate out of private homes or the internet instead.

Prisons

Prisons have long been associated with the development of radical thinking, not least because a closed, difficult environment often engenders different ways of resisting the institution and its depressive reality. Prison is also a fertile ground for temporary opportunistic alliances.²⁶ As regards conversion to religion in prisons, it appears that for some individuals this is a continuation of their own religious search, while others use it to manage their relations with inmates and ensure their personal safety. In both cases it is important to make sure that prison imams are vetted and trained to teach moderate forms of Islam and to offer counter-narratives to extremist views that might have been held before entering prison.²⁷ The [2011 Prevent Strategy](#), while acknowledging the fact that some individuals who have previously been associated with extremist or terrorist networks have engaged in radicalisation while in prison, also points out that the extent to which this radicalisation continues beyond the prison environment is unclear.

Why is it happening here and now?

The attacks raise questions about perpetrators' motives, their association with terrorist groups in Europe or the Middle East and possible connections with earlier attacks.²⁸

Social marginalisation and lack of integration

The second and third generations of migrant communities which came to Western Europe from different parts of the world, experience disconnectedness, a loss of identity, the feeling of not being welcome or accepted at home, while also not being deeply rooted in the culture and traditions of their parents.²⁹ While religious education can in certain cases facilitate the transition into more radical views,³⁰ it appears that the younger generation, seemingly more integrated into the host society, is more vulnerable to turning to religious fundamentalism and seeking to become part of the 'jihadist sub-culture'. Indeed, young people searching for identity are fertile ground for radicalist recruitment. Racism experienced by minority communities, alongside failed integration, feeds the conflict between the extremes in society.³¹ At the same time, Daniela Pisoiu argues that, while many Muslim communities do face relative deprivation, marginalisation and identity crisis, most terrorists are in fact not aggrieved.

Foreign policy

Reports from conflict zones such as Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq and Syria have fed the message of injustice against the global Muslim community, *umma*. Western Europe's involvement in conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, in particular, has been stated as a trigger. The essential impact today stems from the Syrian conflicts.

Radical thinkers link the participation of Western forces with responsibility for the injustices and use these to discredit democracy as a political system. The violence of images from war zones is considered to have a radicalising effect on impressionable minds, especially when in the company of likeminded people and such images are presented by trusted figures of authority. Furthermore, in recruiting, attempts are made to link the injustices abroad with injustices at home,³² mixing rational with emotional considerations. On the other hand, Pisiu notes that the foreign policy argument may be overemphasised, since several attacks connected to Al Qaeda took place in Europe before the intervention in Iraq began.

Foreign financial support

The attacks are financed through individuals recruited into extremist groups specifically for 'fundraising' as well as through strong backing abroad. Powers from oil-rich Gulf States, in particular Saudi Arabia, are able to finance instruments of radicalisation, from madrassas in Pakistan and Bangladesh to Islamist groups in Europe.³³

More freedom to operate

Current events surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood illustrate the different approaches to radical Islam in the countries of their origin and in Western Europe. While [Egypt](#) bans Islamist groups, [Western free speech](#) law makes it impossible to do the same. Ed Husain noted that 'Britain offered the Hizb the freedom to express its ideas freely and recruit uninhibitedly', and that while the Hizb ut-Tahrir was legal in Britain, it was illegal in the Arab world. Furthermore, while radical imams may have been unwelcome at home, the West offered them refuge from persecution. Carolin Goerzig asserts that 'the Netherlands provided a safe haven for political activists either supporting or opposing government policies back home'. The fear of racism and being perceived as racist, alongside the West's deep-rooted belief in freedom of speech has allowed Islamic societies to invite radical speakers to their events with impunity. Ed Husain stated that once in Europe, these imams were free to travel and spread their beliefs.

Propaganda

The increasing prevalence of the media and emerging social media have hastened and magnified the impact of Islamist propaganda. It is even suggested that 90% of terrorist activity now takes place on the internet through social networking tools. The reasons are evident as these channels are popular, mainstream, accessible, user-friendly, reliable and free, providing easy access to the target audience.³⁴ An important role is also been played by the perceived success of ISIL/Da'esh which has attracted growing numbers of foreign fighters.³⁵

EU activity to counter radicalisation

In the EU, Member States have primary competence in matters of internal security. Nevertheless, cross-border threats such as radicalisation are better addressed in a coordinated way, relying on cooperation, common strategies and EU-wide measures. The EU's counter-radicalisation activity is linked, but not limited to wider counter-terrorism instruments, such as the 2005 [European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy](#). The strategy divides EU action in this field into four categories: prevent, protect, pursue and respond, with radicalisation falling under the first category.

A more targeted instrument, the [EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism](#), adopted in 2005, was [revised](#) in June 2014 after the attack on a Jewish museum in Brussels. The Commission's [2014 Communication](#) states that the

evolving trends of radicalisation require an approach broader than traditional law-enforcement measures, and prevention needs to be prioritised, to stop terrorist radicalisation and recruitment at source. This view was shared by the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (CTC) who [acclaimed](#) it for addressing all forms of terrorism and ideologies and for acknowledging the impact of external factors on internal security.

This direction was, however, criticised by researchers in 2008³⁶ for focusing on external causes rather than addressing the individual causes that make people more receptive to radical ideologies. Although research feeding into EU strategies has emphasised the need to consider the complexity of terrorism, concrete policies still seem to focus more on repression than prevention.³⁷ Since this can be seen³⁸ as leading to limited outcomes, the Member States have developed more horizontal cooperation among experts, in line with the [Stockholm Programme](#).

Cooperation and exchange of practices among more than 700 experts and practitioners from Member States, organisations and academia is reflected in the creation of the [Radicalisation Awareness Network](#) (RAN) by the Commission in 2011. This initiative for community involvement was highlighted in the 2010 [EU Internal Security Strategy](#). In line with the acknowledgement that radicalisation is best tackled at the level closest to the individuals susceptible of radical behaviour, in cooperation with local authorities,³⁹ RAN activity is guided by its [Declaration of Good Practices](#). However, it is argued that since there is no methodology in place for determining 'best practices' and Member States face different political pressure, significant change and standardised solutions across the EU should not be expected from RAN.⁴⁰

In the immediate aftermath of the 2015 attacks, the Ministers of Interior of many Member States adopted a [declaration](#) on 11 January in Paris, confirming their commitment to intensified cooperation against radicalisation, especially on the internet, and the operation of terrorist networks. This declaration was complemented by the [input of the EU CTC](#) in preparation for the informal meeting of Justice and Home Affairs Ministers on 29 and 30 January 2015 in Riga, leading up to the [Riga Joint Statement](#) and setting the [strategic agenda](#) of immediate measures.

Main references

For further information, in particular on Member State activity to counter radicalisation, see our accompanying note: '[Religious fundamentalism and radicalisation: a documentary overview](#)'.

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