

Special Conference 1 on Peace and Justice in the Middle East

Measures to prevent the recruitment and radicalisation of young persons by international terrorist groups



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Introduction

Over the last few years the effects of terrorism throughout the world have become more and more apparent as attacks have become more frequent and horrific. The majority of the attacks were carried out by individuals who have been radicalised to believe that it is necessary to take violent action to make others live how they do. Although there are many examples of radicalisation by individuals and groups of all beliefs, the most significant examples of it on an international scale are all from Islamist groups in the Middle-East linked to the doctrine of Wahhabism, most notably by the so-called Islamic State and Al-Qaeda.

More than 6 000 EU citizens are believed to be fighting on behalf of Islamist groups in the region, and senior counter-terrorism experts have long been warning of the threat they could pose if they return. Many European Islamists have travelled abroad to fight in recent years, including to Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Libya. However, the Syrian Civil War has attracted more foreign fighters than any previous conflict for all four sides of the conflict. Clearly there has been a seismic shift making this conflict more attractive to westerners.

One of the big differences between this current group of jihadists and their predecessors who went to Pakistan or Afghanistan is the prodigious use they make of social media sites to keep in touch with each other, terrify their opponents and win more recruits.

Around 30,000 people from around the world, including women and children who would not normally engage in conflict, are estimated to have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State and other extremist groups fighting in the region. One reason suggested for the influx of foreigners in the fight is that the Syrian government took no steps to curtail the inflow of foreigners moving into Iraq during the Iraqi insurgency.

An October 2016 World Bank study found that Islamic State's foreign fighters are surprisingly well-educated: 69% of recruits reported at least a secondary-level education, a large proportion of whom had gone on to study at university. Only 15% of recruits left school before high school, and fewer than 2% are illiterate. They also found a strong correlation between a country's male unemployment rate and the propensity of the country to supply foreign fighters. The report recommended that governments pursue a policy of lowering the unemployment rate among the educated as a counter-terrorism strategy.



From this, it is clear that radicalisation is not just caused by extreme teachings and indoctrination, but that many socioeconomic factors contributing to feeling excluded from society are also key factors.

Definition of Key Terms

Radicalisation

The process of causing someone to adopt extreme views on political or social issues, especially linked to religious fundamentalism. It arises from poor decision making by the targeted person, who typically feels disenfranchised from society, for example, because they experience discrimination, experience poor living conditions or a lack of job opportunities (all of which can lead to a feeling of low esteem). Through social media, for example, they make friends who gradually persuade them to change their behaviour, sympathise with those holding extreme views and encourage them to take action to support extremists.

Extremism

Vocal or active opposition to the fundamental values of a society, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. Extremism also includes calls for death of members of the armed forces.

General Overview

Causes of radicalisation

There are many factors that contribute to the radicalisation process, including feelings of alienation or rootlessness, unemployment, marginalisation, extreme interpretations of religions and online and real-world grooming techniques. There are no typical cases; some radicalised young people have been well-integrated, intelligent and engaged in their education, others have not – there is no clear one-size-fits-all solution.

Alienation and rootlessness can arise where young adults feel torn between the manner in which their parents expect them to behave, and different norms and values communicated by the society in which they are educated, and by the behaviour of their friends and peer groups. While every young adult may experience this, it may be much more difficult to overcome where the two value sets are very different.

Poverty and the sense of being excluded from the benefits enjoyed by others (e.g. basic health services, education and employment) are seen as a cause of radicalisation amongst poor sections of societies. However, poverty need not be a factor: the experiences of discrimination of minorities and social segregation encountered by middle-class, educated persons can also be a significant cause of radicalisation. Particularly if they find that, in spite of the education, skills and values they have acquired, they cannot escape the marginalisation and limited opportunities their parents suffered.

Urbanisation brings large numbers of people together, and so allows ideas to spread more quickly. The internet provides a powerful and readily accessible means for radical ideas to be shared and reinforced amongst large audiences.

Mass media is not directly or consciously influencing young persons to embrace radicalisation. However, it makes them aware of what is going on around the world, and can affect views through the language it uses. Mass media can reduce the threat of radicalisation through positive, balanced and educative commentary on events.

Consequences of radicalisation

Radicalisation results in individuals altering their views on social and political issues. It encourages them to view violence, extreme acts and terrorism as the only means of changing the disadvantages and oppression to which they, or those with whom they identify or sympathise, are subject. The changes sought are not constructive. They do not see (or do not care) that the changes to society that they seek to impose will create its own set of disadvantages and oppression on other sectors of society.

The spread of violent extremism has worsened existing humanitarian crises. Millions of people have fled territories controlled by violent extremist groups. Migratory flows have increased and large displaced persons camps have developed. The UN has calculated that the average time spent in such a camp is 17 years: this damages the social and economic development of the displaced persons.

Violent extremists have been able to recruit over 30,000 foreign terrorist fighters to travel to countries such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Yemen. Some have, or will, return to their home countries and spread hatred, intolerance and violence in their own communities.

The radicalisation process

Many persons disagree with the foreign policy of their government, but do not respond with violence.

Radicalisation is not a single decision but the end result of a process that gradually pushes an individual toward a commitment to violence over time.

The process of change is often intentionally and systematically facilitated or directed by recruiters, but not all who are radicalised are recruited.

Recruiters will aim to identify young persons who find themselves at odds with the culture of their parents, and who are met with hostility from the culture of the society in which they live. Like gang recruiters, they will offer self-esteem and identity in exchange for allegiance to a violent and morally bankrupt ideology. The young person meets and befriends others who are in similar circumstances and facing similar challenges, but who are working to another agenda. The young person is exposed to extremist ideas and behaviours, and these become normalised over time.

Their friendship group will provide interpretation of events and attribution of blame. It will offer solutions, strategies, and tactics. The group will provide motivational frameworks to convince, or cajole, potential participants to become active.

Major Parties Involved

Young adults

In many countries, young adults have a feeling of disenfranchisement with society and often struggle to reconcile conflicting demands such as family traditions and the norms of the society in which they live. In certain communities, extremism can be seen as a positive way out of the negative feelings.

Teachers and givers of spiritual guidance

They are in a position to influence the thoughts of young people and are often seen in many systems as the first line of defence against extremism. If they do not have the tools to detect it, it can be difficult for them to carry out their crucial role effectively.

Governments

They have the resources to address issues identified by those vulnerable to extremism such as unemployment and exclusion from society. They need to put in place comprehensive plans on how to tackle radicalisation.

Nationals from more than 50 countries have travelled to fight with Islamic State:

- the following countries are estimated to have contributed more than 1,000 fighters: Tunisia (2,250), Saudi Arabia (2,000), Jordan (1,500), Morocco (1,500), France (1,200) and Russia (1,150).
- the following countries are estimated to have contributed between 400 and 1,000 fighters: Lebanon (900), Libya (600), Turkey (600), Germany (550), Ukraine (550), Uzbekistan (500), Pakistan (500) and Belgium (440).¹

International Terrorist Groups

They wish to capitalise on socioeconomic problems in western member states to entice discontent youths to join them. They are able to circumnavigate normal prevention methods through the use of the internet and social media.

¹ These figures have been taken from an article entitled "Islamic State: Where do its fighters come from?" published in The Telegraph on 19 July 2017. Where ranges were shown in the article, the average of the range has been quoted here.



Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of Event
2003-2011	Iraqi insurgency in which militia (especially the so-called Islamic State) took advantage of the power vacuum in Iraq following the US-led invasion.
2011 -	The Arab Spring, which led to a crackdown on dissidents in Syria and ultimately to the Syrian Civil War.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Security Council Resolution **2178 (2014)** makes an explicit link between violent extremism and terrorism, and calls for the stemming the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (**FTFs**). It underscores the importance of the measures taken being in line with international norms and it recognises the need for prevention.

Security Council's resolution **2242 (2015)** urges Member States and the United Nations system *"to ensure the participation and leadership of women and women's organizations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism."*

Security Council resolution **2250 (2015)** urges States *"to consider ways to increase inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels in local, national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict, including institutions and mechanisms to counter violent extremism"*.

The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (General Assembly resolution **60/288, 2016**), explicitly addressed prevention and foresaw balanced implementation across all four of its pillars:

- (I) tackling conditions conducive to terrorism;
- (II) preventing and combating terrorism;
- (III) building countries' capacity to combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system in supporting that capacity; and
- (IV) ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law while countering terrorism

In January 2016, the Secretary-General presented a '**Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism**' to the General Assembly of the UN.

In July 2016, the General Assembly adopted by consensus, resolution (**A/RES/70/291**) on the **Fifth Review of Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy** reinforcing global consensus in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism. The General Assembly:

- recognised the importance of preventing violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism; and



- recommended that Member States consider the implementation of relevant recommendations of the Secretary-General's Plan of Action as applicable to the national context.

In May 2017, the United Nations Security Council emphasises the need for a comprehensive approach to countering the spread of terrorism and violent extremism.

- It encourages Member States to engage with relevant local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to counter the violent extremist narrative that can incite terrorist acts.
- States are also called upon to address the conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism, including by empowering youth, families, women, religious, cultural and education leaders, and all other concerned groups of civil society, and promoting social inclusion and cohesion.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The Aarhus model (Denmark)

This model aims to create trust between authorities and the social environment in which extremists work through special counselling and monitoring services for those known to have been radicalised. Exit programmes are run for those who support or who are prepared to carry out violent acts, offering employment options rather than prison. There is a programme of rehabilitation of fighters returning from Syria, involving parents, family networks, social workers and teachers.

The Mechelen model (Belgium)

The programme in this city puts a strong focus on prevention, in which policing and community dialogue go hand in hand. There are large numbers of police and surveillance cameras, which reduces local sentiment that the government has abandoned them. Commentators note that the city has benefitted from a focus on multiculturalism, a fight against discrimination, and increasing the social ties between the 124 nationalities living in the city.

The PREVENT strategy (UK)

This focuses on responding to the ideological challenges posed by terrorism and extremism by aiming to offer practical help to those most vulnerable to extremist ideologies, and to provide them with advice and support. It involves supporting community-based campaigns, mentorship programmes, and supporting local authorities. The legal duty of schools to safeguard vulnerable children has been extended to explicitly include consideration of the risk of radicalisation.

Actions taken include distributing leaflets in areas with large Muslim populations warning of the risks of prosecution for returning jihadists. Those alleged to have had “involvement in the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism” have been arrested and investigated properly. Some young men have had their passports confiscated to stop them leaving the country.



Additionally, the law was changed to make it easier to prevent anyone travelling abroad if their “actual or suspected” activities are deemed contrary to the public interest. Previously, passports could only be confiscated if someone was engaged in “demonstrably undesirable” acts. British citizenship has been stripped from identified jihadists who have dual nationality, including some born in the UK. However, the law prohibits making an individual stateless, so it can’t be used against British citizens; as a result of this, some dual nationals have given up their other citizenship to thwart government efforts to take away their UK rights.

PREVENT is not considered to have identified and addressed the causes of violent extremism yet.

Religious Rehabilitant Group (Singapore)

Unpaid, volunteer groups of moderate Islamic scholars and teachers offer religious counselling to detained extremists and their families. After-care initiatives are provided under which former extremists are rehabilitated in society. Violent readings of Islam are challenged by developing counter narratives based on Islamic scholarship. Former radicals are involved in the process. Radicalisation in prisons is addressed.

Exit to Enter (Germany)

This is an initiative that recognises that dealing with extremism needs to consider socio-economic factors. It helps individuals to leave far-right groups by offering training opportunities or employment options. It does not directly combat racism and xenophobia; instead it offers ideas on how to gradually address the underlying factors that allow extremist groups to develop. Participants can find a way to leave extremist groups and (re)discover the option for a ‘normal’ life outside extremism.

The long term financial commitment of the German government recognises that prevention does not happen overnight; it takes long-term strategies and adequate financial contributions to be effective.

Possible Solutions

The Warning Signs

Raising awareness is important for prevention; to spot warning indicators the peers of someone being radicalised must understand the nature of extremism. The risks posed by the internet and social media, which are especially influential in the radicalisation of young people, must be known; it is easy for an individual to enter an “echo chamber” of false stories, extremist propaganda, and likeminded individuals from all around the world, and be tempted by the stories of a better life preached by fanatics.

Sudden changes in behaviour and unexpected shifts in the opinions of an individual need to be recognised as alarming signs to be acted upon. Often family members recognise such changes but feel powerless and are not sure how to counteract them; much of the problem could be stopped if they had means to alert someone about their concerns.

Countering radicalisation

For those individuals fully exposed to radical ideology and believing it, but who have not committed criminal acts, interventions are needed to stop any future action, and to educate them on the dangers of extremism; the earlier this is done the greater the likelihood it is successful.

The key elements to intervention are trust and legitimacy; people with trusted relationships to the individual and respected positions in society, such as family members, religious leaders, teachers, and doctors, should be considered for prominent roles to provide a good example to the potential extremist. If there is a wider problem with increasing levels of radicalisation in an area, community centres and places of worship are ideal settings for interventions.

In the short term, there is no straightforward way to measure the success of any particular de-radicalisation process. Nor is it clear, for example, whether interventions delivered by religious leaders are more or less effective than those by psychologists, youth workers, former radicals, family members or others; all that matters is that the intervention gives the individual a compelling alternative route to extremism.

Banning non-violent extremists risks a backlash and jeopardises the universal human right to Freedom of Expression (Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). It appears much more effective to directly challenge misguided and misleading messages through fair debate and to address issues that are causing those vulnerable to radicalisation discontent. The voice of reason should always counterbalance and outshine the myopic rantings of the delusional and the slick tongues of those taking extreme views of religious teachings, or who perceive hereditary superiority of their own kind (e.g. white supremacists).

International terrorist groups have become exceptional at spreading their messages and inciting violence across the world; the most notable example of this is the so-called Islamic State, which has a smart, sophisticated propaganda machine, the messages of which must be countered through coordinated theological argument by moderate leaders in the Islamic faith.

The involvement of the authorities with each community is a crucial measure in quashing the current increase in Islamist radicalisation in western countries; disconnection from those in power and unhappiness can cause vexation at governments and a need of salvation, which can often wrongly be thought to be found through extremism. In the West, the Islamic community is often seen as alien and made to feel unwelcome as a direct result of prejudice; this has very much contributed to a feeling of discontent.

Radicalisation cannot be addressed by simplistic political messages and soundbites. It needs to be met head on and its theological and political grounding shown to be unsound.

What can be done?

An obvious solution to Islamist extremism is closer surveillance by security agencies of what is being said on social media and in radical mosques (assuming these can be identified), so that radicalisation can be detected and prevented at a much earlier stage. However, it is important to take a measured approach, and policies which are seen to be unfairly targeting groups within society could be counter-productive. Additionally, this can be seen as violating

Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to privacy, and as a constraint of individuals' liberty – this may strengthen the arguments put forward by extremists.

Greater dialogue between countries where terrorist groups operate, and those from where radicalised individuals are travelling to conflicts, through international organisations such as INTERPOL is conducive to slowing the flow of extremist recruits. This and the implementation of enhanced data-sharing measures between Member States may help to identify extremists earlier and locate radicals, and therefore tackle radicalisation at its root cause.

Fundamentally, young people must be offered a positive vision of their future and a genuine chance to realise their aspirations and potential through their own hard work.

The giving of young people better employment prospects and social opportunities at home, whilst also working to counter the idealistic and misguided notion that Europeans and others travelling to war zones such as Iraq and Syria are somehow helping the situation is another measure of addressing the social exclusion that can lead to radicalisation.

The engagement of young people in volunteering and mentoring schemes, or employment in non-governmental organisations can help make vulnerable individuals become part of a group. Increasing the interaction between separated communities through education and awareness, and the promotion of partnership and solidarity will also increase inclusivity in society, and reduce the discontent that can be a major factor in making young people susceptible to radicalisation.

The education of young people to encourage critical thinking will make them less vulnerable to extreme views. They will also be less susceptible to polarised reporting whichever medium it is delivered through. Companies hosting on line content, and social media websites, could be required to be more proactive in blocking taking down extremist content; this can lead to allegations of censorship and the blocking of people's rights to freedom of expression.

Governments could sponsor the creation of content to counter extremist messages and provide positive counter-messages with the help of community leaders. Getting messages to isolated communities can often be difficult; the use of respected members of society can allow the messages to reach those especially at risk of radicalisation.



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