



Addressing Islamic Extremism



In the UK, groups that hold views considered 'extreme' have included nationalists, the far right, and more recently Islamic extremists. Government extremism policies mainly focus on the latter, although the Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill due to be introduced in 2016 covers all extremists. This POSTnote looks at Islamic extremism, radicalisation and deradicalisation, and policy responses to violent and non-violent extremism.

Background

Extremism is defined by the Government as "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs".¹

Academic research distinguishes between 'extremism of thought' and 'extremism of action'. Violence can be carried out to support non-extremist ideas and non-extremist activities can be used to defend extremist ideas.⁷ However, wider discussions often blur these definitions. Because of this, drafting legislation on this policy area is challenging.

There is limited participant research that looks at the causes of extremism, how individuals are radicalised, or the ways in which it might be prevented.² Those who are, or have been, involved in extremist activity are often unwilling to engage with researchers, especially where their confidentiality or immunity from prosecution cannot be guaranteed.³ Therefore little detail is known about the early processes and pathways to radicalisation. However, the research base does show that there is no typical extremist or single process of radicalisation.^{4,5,6,7,8}

Overview

- Research is limited but indicates that there is no typical extremist or typical pathway to extremism.
- A key gap in the evidence is why some who hold similar views as extremists do not engage in violence.
- Despite wider concerns about online radicalisation, studies suggest that friends and family are a more important source of radical ideas.
- There is limited research on what deradicalisation or counter-radicalisation interventions are most effective.
- The UK Government has taken a 'value-based' approach to tackling extremism. This seeks to support moderate Islamic voices.
- The Government's Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill, due to be introduced this year, will also target non-violent extremism.

Factors Relevant to Islamic Extremism

Academic research has identified five factors which may be associated with those who come to hold extremist Islamic views. (These may also be relevant to other types of extremism.)

- **Uncertainties around identity:** Individuals can reduce uncertainties about their identity by subscribing to an ideology or becoming part of a group. Such groups can provide rigid standards for attitudes and behaviours,⁹ accentuating similarities between people within the group, and exaggerating differences with those outside, leading to a 'them and us' view.¹⁰ For example one study found that 66% of those involved in extremist activity in the UK were Muslims with Pakistani background;¹¹ it argued that these individuals were experiencing a 'second generation culture clash' so did not feel accepted by either their parents' generation or wider UK society. They were therefore seeking to reduce uncertainties around their identity by joining radical groups. But other studies argue that identity is a poor predictor of radicalisation because seeking an identity is a normal part of human development.^{12,13}
- **Ideological:** Some academics argue that knowledge of Islamic teachings is more limited in extremist individuals.⁵

Therefore, rather than being committed to an ideology, a more predictive factor for extremism might be that the individual’s moral framework is more accommodating of attitudes and behaviours not accepted by society.¹²

- **Personal:** Many radicalised individuals have experienced a life event or crisis that led them to seek support and safety within an extremist group. For some this crisis has led them to convert to radical Islam.¹⁴ Others have experienced discrimination or racism, often because of their religion, and therefore felt unfairly stigmatised.³ This has led them to seek out religious groups, some of which are extreme.
- **Grievances:** Extremist individuals have been found to disagree with UK foreign policy,¹⁵ or be concerned about negative portrayals of Muslims in the media.¹⁶ These concerns then reinforce other factors, such as ideological or personal.¹¹
- **Age/Gender:** Radicalised individuals are mostly men in their 20s or early 30s.¹⁷

Research shows no clear link between extremism and an individual’s education or employment background. Some studies have found radicalised individuals have had limited access to education and employment.⁴ Others, however, found radicalised individuals had a higher than average education compared to others in their demographic.^{3,42}

Radicalisation

Radicalisation is the social and psychological process of increasing an individual’s commitment to extremist political or religious identity.³⁰ The term is mostly used in relation to Islamic extremism. The process of becoming radicalised is incremental, and models to describe steps towards this have used staircase or conveyer-belt metaphors.^{5,19}

However, these models have been criticised for making the process seem more linear than research suggests and there is no consensus on how individuals move from one step or phase to the next.

Research suggests two shifts in an individual’s attitudes are particularly important in the process of radicalisation: from feeling sympathy for a cause to supporting it actively, and from using conventional political tools to try to bring about change to using extreme options (which may or may not include violence).¹⁹ A key gap in the evidence is why some who hold equally strong views and have predisposing factors do not engage in violence.²⁰ One theory suggests that this group cannot rationalise extreme behaviour by

Box 1. Women Extremists

Between 2011/12 and 2013/14, 9% of those referred to the Government’s counter-extremism support programme as being at risk from radicalisation were women. Women have also been involved in recruiting other women and girls to extremist causes.¹⁸ Although research is limited, many of the factors leading women and girls to become radicalised are similar to those which lead men to become radicalised, although roles within extremist groups are likely to reflect traditional gender roles. Women tend to only be mentioned in policy discussions as family members or victims of extremist groups. This means that deradicalisation and counter-radicalisation programmes have no gender-focused elements.⁵³

justifying their actions to themselves.²¹ There may also be protective factors that help reduce their likelihood of becoming radicalised, such as having a supportive network of friends and family, or a fulfilling job.^{30,46}

Despite concerns about online radicalisation, studies have found friends and family are a more important source of radical ideas.^{2,21,22} However there is no link to any particular family background.⁸ This is especially the case for women, who make up a minority of extremists (see Box 1). Other studies have focused on schools, universities and prisons as sites of radicalisation. These studies found that it was not the locations themselves that were key but rather the fact that they are all places where individuals are exposed to new ideas and challenges from peers.^{2,23,24}

Other studies identified the importance of figures such as clerics, who assume roles of moral authority; individuals with less knowledge of Islamic teaching may be more susceptible to such influential recruiters.^{15,25,26} Extremist groups have similar recruitment strategies to those used by criminal gangs.¹¹ While ideology can play a role, it is not necessarily the most important reason for being drawn to extremist groups, but rather sits alongside other factors such as status, thrill and excitement, or peer pressure.⁵

Disengagement and Deradicalisation

Disengagement is when individuals reduce their participation in violence, without necessarily changing their views. Deradicalisation describes processes or interventions that result in an individual’s commitment to, or involvement in, violent radicalisation being reduced so that they no longer pose a risk.³⁰

A number of reasons for exiting extremist groups have been identified. Table 1 shows a summary of some of these factors, grouped into those that ‘push’ individuals away from radical groups, or ‘pull’ individuals towards more conventional roles.²⁷ Extremist groups demand complete loyalty, so when individuals begin to question a group’s aims or methods, this can challenge their whole rationale for involvement.²⁷ A combination of these factors may be needed in order for an individual to disengage from an extremist group.⁴⁰

Table 1. Factors behind Disengagement²⁷

Push Factors
Expectations of being a group member unmet
Disillusionment with strategy or actions of the group
Inability to cope with the psychological effects of violence
Loss of faith in the group’s ideology
Difficulty in adapting to clandestine lifestyle
Experiencing burnout
Pull Factors
Competing loyalties between the group and outside
Employment or educational demands or opportunities
Increased family demands or desire to marry/establish a family
Financial incentives
Possibility of an amnesty for past actions

Disengagement and deradicalisation strategies

There is no single approach to deradicalisation. There may be a complex mix of reasons for becoming, and remaining, radicalised, and then disengaging, even within one individual.²⁸ All the factors outlined above can therefore be used in disengagement or deradicalisation programmes. These utilise a range of measures that target sets of reasons why individuals become radicalised.⁴⁰ Because of the lack of evaluation of counter-extremism and deradicalisation programmes little is known about what strategies are effective in particular circumstances or for different groups.²⁹ Failed intervention attempts can strengthen the views that are being targeted.⁴⁰

Counter-radicalisation strategies

Counter-radicalisation interventions seek to protect vulnerable people from becoming socially or politically radicalised.³⁰ They are therefore aimed at general populations or those thought to be at risk. Research has identified protective factors that help build individual and community resilience against radicalisation such as:

- living in areas of social cohesion where people feel safe
- having educational and employment opportunities
- having access to democratic methods of voicing opinion and having trust in institutions
- having access to religious leadership that can inform and moderate religious perspectives.³⁰

One US study found that engaging young Muslims in mainstream politics was an important factor preventing radicalisation.^{31,5}

Encouraging dialogue, in locations such as schools, universities and online, where individuals tend to mix with others who are not part of their immediate social group, is seen as key.^{32,33,40} Educational initiatives focus on commonalities between groups, on developing skills to critique extremist propaganda, on how to effect change using political processes, and on teaching comparative religious studies (see Box 2).³³

Box 2. Examples of Counter-Radicalisation Programmes

Programmes have tended to be small-scale and locally targeted. Funding comes from a range of sources. For example:

- **The Think Project** worked with young people in Wales, seeking to address issues of extremism and racism by building respect, tolerance and acceptance between groups. It held workshops on understanding identity, dispelling myths around race and religion, and building personal confidence.³⁴
- **ACT NOW** is a programme for colleges and universities developed by the Association of Chief Police Officers. Participants play the part of police officers responding to an extremist incident, highlighting the decisions the police have to take, and how diverse communities can work in partnership with the police.³⁵
- **Active Change Foundation** works with young people in East London. It seeks to build individual resilience against extremism and gang violence. It provides a safe space where young people can meet and discuss issues and runs a Youth Leadership Programme to support young people to become role models for their local community.³⁶

Policy Responses to Islamic Extremism

Responses to tackling extremism can be broadly categorised as:

- **Value-based approaches** that see the way that Islam is understood and practised as problematic. These approaches seek to develop or support a more moderate interpretation of Islam.²⁹ Academic literature describes the UK Government as taking a value-based approach to tackling extremism, as it has provided support and funding for groups articulating different perspectives.³⁷ Some Asian and Middle Eastern governments are also considered to follow value-based approaches.³⁹
- **Means-based approaches** that see extremism as having social and political, rather than ideological, roots. These approaches focus on changing the personal and political factors that draw individuals to extremist ideas by providing practical and economic help. Research suggests that it is easier to change an individual's behaviour than their beliefs.^{7,38} The Met Police has previously used a means-based approach in its programmes.³⁹ Other European governments have also taken this approach and use the extent to which radicalised individuals disconnect from extremists and crime as measures of success.⁴⁰

The UK Government response

The UK Government's counter-terrorism strategy, called Contest, includes measures to identify those who are vulnerable to radicalisation. This strand, called Prevent, began in 2006. It prioritised community engagement as the most effective way to counteract extremist action.³⁷

Community-based approaches to counterterrorism have been used successfully in the past, including in Northern Ireland (see Box 3).⁴¹ Prevent also focused on information-gathering on potential extremist action. Although only a small number of people engage in violent extremist acts, often information about grievances and planned violence is known by others within their communities.⁴²

Early on, the Prevent strategy sought to build resilience by supporting skills and capacity development to combat extremism and by providing a 'safe space' for local communities to debate important issues.^{43,44} Prevent funding only supported projects in Muslim communities, which resulted in concern that other types of extremism, such as far right extremism, were not being tackled at the community level.²⁹ Trusted relationships between authorities and community groups were seen as vital. Some researchers argued that Prevent's sole focus on Muslim communities hindered this.^{49,50}

Following these concerns,^{45,49} the Prevent strategy was revised in 2011. It now focuses on all types of extremism. It has an increased emphasis on crime prevention but significantly less resources allocated to community engagement. Instead, the Government will launch a new Cohesive Community Programme in 2016.⁴⁶ Under Prevent, there is a statutory duty on teachers, lecturers and other

Box 3. Lessons from Other Types of Extremism

There is little academic literature that compares different types of extremist ideologies and therefore a lack of evidence on how understanding one type of extremism may help the response to another. Where the literature has found comparisons, they are between Islamic and nationalist extremisms as they share an emphasis on identity politics, the recruitment of disaffected individuals, and the use of social media to recruit and share information. However, ways of identifying those vulnerable to radicalisation that work well for one extremist group may not work so well for another.³ Limited use has been made of lessons learned about community resilience and cohesion from anti-racism education or multicultural programmes in counter-radicalisation initiatives.^{32,33}

public sector workers to identify individuals who might be at risk of radicalisation. (See [CBP7238](#).)

The Government's Counter-Extremism strategy was published in October 2015 and the Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill will follow this year.^{46,47} It will cover all types of extremism, as well as targeting non-violent extremism. The Bill will introduce a new civil order regime to restrict extremist activity (after consultation) and powers to "intervene in unregulated education settings".^{47,48}

Pros and Cons of the UK Response

A report by the Communities and Local Government Select Committee found the Prevent strategy has had some positive impacts, for example: building stronger links between local authorities and Muslim communities; promoting the voices of Muslim women and young people; and highlighting the need for more open debate.⁴⁹ But the Committee concluded that the negative results of the policy outweighed the positives.⁴⁹ Wider critiques of the Government's approach have argued:

- That it stigmatised Muslim communities – so they became a 'suspect community'⁵⁰ – by increasing the perception or reality of state surveillance on this group.⁴⁹
- That its focus on security has worked against other government priorities such as community cohesion.^{29,39}
- That it has not tackled how different types of extremism reinforce each other.⁸
- That it does not challenge underlying inequalities. For example, as a group, Muslim women have some of the highest unemployment rates, poorest health outcomes and lowest educational attainment in the UK.^{51,52} Despite being part of the Government's strategy on encouraging moderate Islamic voices, these issues have not been specifically addressed.⁵³

Non-Violent Extremism

The Government's Counter-Extremism Strategy proposes measures that target those who support non-violent extremist ideologies, seen by the Government as a potential first step towards embracing violent extremist ideas.⁴⁶ However, research evidence does not support the view that a non-violent extremist ideology leads to violent extremism.^{7,41} The assessment of whether an idea is radical is subjective and is dependent on the values of those evaluating it.⁵⁴ Some researchers argue that authorities

should recognise a distinction between 'healthy radicalism' – seeking to bring about change through political protest – and violent extremism – where mainstream engagement has been rejected.⁵⁴ Some ideas that were seen as radical in the past are now widely accepted. Linking those holding non-violent extremist ideas with those who use violence may alienate people that support some of the same principles but disagree with the methods. Potential allies in countering violent extremism may be lost in this way.⁷

There are concerns that seeking to control non-violent extremist dialogue could limit free speech⁵⁵ (the European Court of Human Rights holds that free speech includes ideas that could offend or disturb⁵⁶). In practice, the right to free speech already has restrictions placed on it (such as protecting public order or the welfare of some groups). Academic concern focuses on two aspects of this: whether the Government can be a trusted arbiter of what ideas should be aired publicly; and whether these restrictions are targeted at one section of the population.²⁰ The consensus is that progress can only be made by debating and challenging extremist ideologies.^{56,57} Under Prevent, the statutory duty on teachers and lecturers to identify individuals who might be at risk of radicalisation (see [CBP7199](#)) could be argued to have a negative effect on debate by limiting what students feel they can discuss.^{28,58,59}

Islamic and British Values

The Government's definition of extremism takes as its basis an opposition to 'British values'. Despite regular attempts to define it, there is a lack of consensus about what it means to be British. When asked, people describe locations, or successes by industry, in military action or in football.^{60,61} The British Social Attitudes survey found that 95% of people felt that speaking English was important but only 24% considered being Christian part of Britishness.⁶¹

Research on British Muslims' attitudes towards their identity found that over 90% felt themselves to be British.⁶² (This is higher than in some other ethnic/religious groups, such as Caribbean Christians.⁶²) A high proportion (70-75%) see no incompatibility between being British and having other identities. For young people especially, their definition of what it means to be British included having the flexibility to accommodate both national and religious identities.⁶³

However, Muslims in Britain are more likely to experience discrimination and harassment than other religious groups.^{64,65} This can limit a sense of engagement with wider society, encouraging stronger links to religious identity.^{12,66} A community's confidence in authorities, and cooperation with them, is affected by how 'fair' the community perceives the authorities to be. Many Muslims felt they had a positive relationship with authorities.⁶³ However, one study found participants' reported increased feelings of alienation as a result of the attention they received when, for example, at airports.⁶⁶ Those surveyed saw their Muslim status as a sign of trustworthiness and were concerned that it might instead be seen as a potential threat.⁶⁶

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