



RAN ISSUE PAPER

The Root Causes of Violent Extremism

Introduction

There are multiple ways to examine the root causes of violent extremism. There is no single cause or pathway into radicalisation and violent extremism. There is a wide array of factors on the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of analysis. Terrorism research has indicated that neither poverty nor socio-economic deprivation are direct root causes of terrorism. Existing research has focused principally on contexts outside the EU and provides broad categories that do not readily conform to the radicalisation or violent extremism of salafi-jihadi individuals within Europe.ⁱ This brief issue paper provides a summary of ‘root causes’ leading to violent extremism.

This brief issue paper was written by Magnus Ranstorp



According to **Magnus Ranstorp**, violent extremism can be best conceptualised as a **kaleidoscope of factors**ⁱⁱ, creating infinite individual combinations. There are some basic primary colours which create complex interlocking combinations: 1) individual socio-psychological factors; 2) social factors; 3) political factors; 4) ideological and religious dimensions; 5) the role of culture and identity issues; 6) trauma and other trigger mechanisms; and three other factors that are a motor for radicalisation: 7) group dynamics; 8) radicalisers/groomers; and 9) the role of social media. It is the combined interplay of some of these factors that causes violent extremism.ⁱⁱⁱ

- **Individual socio-psychological factors**, which include grievances and emotions such as: alienation and exclusion; anger and frustration; grievance and a strong sense of injustice; feelings of humiliation; rigid binary thinking; a tendency to misinterpret situations; conspiracy theories; a sense of victimhood; personal vulnerabilities; counter-cultural elements.^{iv}
- **Social factors**, which include social exclusion; marginalisation and discrimination^v (real or perceived); limited social mobility; limited education or employment; an element of displacement; criminality; lack of social cohesion and self-exclusion.
- **Political factors**, which include grievances framed around victimhood against Western foreign policy and military intervention. The central core of this narrative is that the 'West is at war with Islam', which creates a narrative of 'them and us'. Conflicts are filtered through this core narrative: Bosnia; Chechnya; Iraq; Syria; Somalia and Palestine, etc. These conflicts and events

can become a focal point for mobilisation. The ban on the Muslim veil; the cartoon crises and other contentious issues are all evidence that the West is at war with Muslim communities. There is a strong sense of alienation and injustice which is reinforced by Islamophobia, xenophobia and discrimination.

- **Ideological/religious factors** include a sacred historical mission and belief in apocalyptic prophesy; a salafi-jihadi interpretation of Islam; a violent jihadi mission; a sense that Islam is under siege and a desire to protect ummah under assault. These beliefs also include the view that Western society embodies immoral secularism.
- **Culture and identity crisis** relates to cultural marginalisation, which produces alienation and a lack of belonging to either home or the parents' society.^{vi} This reinforces religious solidarity with Muslims around the world.
- **Trauma and other trigger mechanisms** involve psychological trauma experienced via parents with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other complex psychological problems.
- **Group dynamics** involve charismatic leadership; pre-existing friendship and kinship ties; socialisation; groupthink; self-isolation; polarising behaviour and counter-cultural elements. **Scott Atran** argues that "extremism arises, in part, when membership in a group reinforces deeply held ideals, and an individual's identity merges with the group's."^{vii}
- **Radicalisers/groomers** involve hate preachers and those that prey on vulnerabilities and grievances and channel recruits into violent extremism through persuasion, pressure and manipulation. This underscores the



importance of **extremist milieus** existing in so-called underground study circles or in prison. According to **Petter Nesser**, a key ingredient is the critical mass of jihadist entrepreneurs.^{viii}

- **Social media**, which provides connectivity, virtual participation and an echo-chamber for likeminded extremist views.^{ix} The internet “reaches otherwise unreachable individuals”; it accelerates the process of radicalisation; and increases opportunities for self-radicalisation.^x

The **radicalisation mechanisms** are a product of interplay between **push-** and **pull-factors** within individuals. It is important to recognise that there are different degrees and speeds of radicalisation.

The **push-factors** involve: social, political and economic grievances; a sense of injustice and discrimination; personal crisis and tragedies; frustration; alienation; a fascination with violence; searching for answers to the meaning of life; an identity crisis; social exclusion; alienation; marginalisation; disappointment with democratic processes; polarisation, etc.

The **pull-factors** are a personal quest,^{xi} a sense of belonging to a cause, ideology or social network; power and control; a sense of loyalty and commitment; a sense of excitement and adventure; a romanticised view of ideology and cause; the possibility of heroism, personal redemption, etc.

There are also other explanations. According to **Oliver Roy**, “research suggests that most extremists are either people who returned suddenly to Islam, or converts with no Islamic background.”^{xii} **Roy** advances 10 points^{xiii} for understanding why extremism comes about:

- no psychiatric specific patterns for radicals except for **frustration** and **resentment** against society;
- the majority of radicals come from **second generation Muslims born in Europe**, the others are **converts**; Farhad Khosrokhavar argues these second generation immigrants are often “stigmatized, rejected and treated as second-class citizens”.^{xiv}
- many have a past of **petty delinquency** and **drug dealing**;
- it is clearly a **youth movement** and **peer phenomenon**;
- **very few have a history of militancy**, either political (pro-Palestinian movements) or religious;
- the unusual proportion of **converts**;
- the recruitment of **young women** to marry “jihadists”;
- the main motivation of young men for joining jihad seems to be fascination with the narrative: “**the small brotherhood of super-heroes who avenge the Muslim Ummah**”;
- adoption of the **Salafi version of Islam**, because Salafism is both simple to understand (don’ts and dos), and rigid, providing a personal psychological structuring effect; moreover, Salafism is the negation of cultural Islam, which is the Islam of their parents.
- radicals have a **loose or lack of connection with Muslim communities in Europe**.



ⁱ For example see: Tore Bjorgo, *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality And Ways Forward* (Routledge, 2005); Edward Newman (2006) Exploring the “Root Causes” of Terrorism, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29:8, 749-772; and USAID, *Development Assistance And Counter-Extremism: A Guide To Programming* (October 2009).

ⁱⁱ Magnus Ranstorp and Peder Hyllegren, *Förebyggande av våldsbejakande extremism I tredjeland* (Swedish Defence University 2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ Mohammed Hafez & Creighton Mullins, “The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38:11, 958-975 (2015). Also see: Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010) Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33:9, 797-814

^{iv} New research by CSIS has challenged the academic notion that terrorist personality does not exist. It argues it is possible to find personality traits in terrorists such as ‘sensation seeking’ and ‘social dominance orientation’. CSIS, *Personality Traits and Terrorism* (2013).

^v James A. Piazza, “Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism,” *Journal of Peace Research* 48(3) (2011). This statistical analysis of 172 countries between 1970 and 2006, yielding over 3 000 observations, found solid support for a link between minority groups’ experience with economic discrimination and higher rates of domestic terrorism. He found that “countries that feature economic discrimination against minority groups experience around six more incidents of domestic terrorism per year.”

^{vi} Dina Al Raffie, “Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora”, *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol.6, No.4 (Winter 2013).

^{vii} Scott Atrana, Hammad Sheikh, and Angel Gomez. “Devoted actors sacrifice for close comrades and sacred cause”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 111 no. 50 (2015).

^{viii} Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe* (Hurst, 2016).

^{ix} Charlie Edwards & Luke Gribbon (2013) Pathways to Violent Extremism in the Digital Era, *The RUSI Journal*, 158:5, 40-47

^x Ines von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon, *Radicalisation in the digital era The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism* (RAND, 2013).

^{xi} Arie W. Kruglanski, “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism”, *Advances in Political Psychology*, Vol. 35, Suppl. 1, (2014).

^{xii} Declan Butler, “Terrorism science: 5 insights into jihad in Europe”, *Nature*, 2 December 2015.

^{xiii} The following factors have been derived from speech by Oliver Roy, “What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism? – A scientific perspective on the causes/circumstances of joining the scene”, International Terrorism: How can prevention and repression keep pace? BKA Autumn Conference, 18-19 November 2015.

^{xiv} Declan Butler, “Terrorism science: 5 insights into jihad in Europe”, *Nature*, 2 December 2015.