

# WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER BECOMES RADICALISED

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Prevention of Violent  
Extremism and Family  
Support Activities in Six  
Western European Countries

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# FOREWORD

Finn Church Aid and the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers established by it have engaged in comprehensive work to prevent violent extremism and radicalisation since 2014. The idea behind this activity has been to build a safer world by increasing confidence in and cooperation with authorities, organisations, religious communities, and families who have experienced the radicalisation of loved ones.

The “Reach Out” project which began in 2016 has played a key role in the implementation of the measures in Finland. The goal of its third stage, implemented in 2020–2021, was to raise awareness and understanding about practices that can support families and communities hurt by the radicalisation process. The point of departure was that the prevention of radicalisation and the re-integration of a radicalised person into society cannot be achieved without the support of a wider group of people. Family members, relatives and local community representatives in particular often have a crucial role to play in enabling people to leave violent acts behind and break away from radical ideas and actions. As for finding a home, a place to work or study and building new social relationships, these can only be accomplished after the wider community accepts the person into their midst. The families and immediate circle of the radicalised person are hard hit by the situation in many ways. Should one tell relatives, acquaintances, employers, colleagues and neighbours about the situation in the family? Is it justified to apply for sick leave in this stressful situation? The burden seems endless and, unfortunately, families are often excluded from the plans for immediate support measures when we search for ways to prevent radicalisation and help those seeking to separate from extremist movements. For the development of family support measures, the “Reach Out 3” project decided to compile the accompanying comparative research report which seeks to explain some of the family support models that are currently being implemented across Europe.

The report focuses on the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and Finland. These countries were taken for scrutiny because they differ greatly from one another in terms of both their extremist operational environments and their strategies to respond to the challenges posed by extremism. Thousands of people currently play a variety of pre-

ventive roles in the countries concerned. They are positioned in various ways in an ever-expanding field of public authorities, organisations, think tanks and academic research institutions. Within the framework of the report, it is simply impossible to provide a comprehensive picture of the measures aimed at the family and community levels, let alone of the preventive work as a whole. Rather, the report's point of departure is to consider what kinds of social challenges extremism has created in the countries concerned and how people have sought to respond to these challenges by aiming support measures at the family and local community levels. The aim is to bring together experiences and best practices in support of families while explaining some of the challenges related to this subject. The report is intended to serve as an information package for professionals and members of the general public who are interested in the extremism of our time, the radicalisation processes and the possibilities of preventing the adverse effects they have on individuals, communities and society as a whole.

A total of 19 authorities and representatives of organisations and research institutions involved in preventive work, and three people who have experienced the radicalisation of their children, were interviewed for the report. Some of the interviewees are closely involved in the national contexts of their home country, whereas others are occupied in an international field of work. In addition to the interviews, the report material also included some recordings of media appearances by specialists in this subject, websites of public authorities and organisations, research reports, documentary films, news reports, the policy programmes of national governments and authorities, and research literature on the subject. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and the organisations and authorities they represent were also left anonymous in the report. In the case of freely available material collected from the websites of organisations and administrative bodies, the names of both the person and the organisations are mentioned. Due to the sensitivity of the theme, the report does not mention the home country of the parents who have experienced the radicalisation of their children and who were interviewed for the study.

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# INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the 21st century, the countries of Western Europe have developed strategies aimed at countering violent extremism to prevent the radicalisation of individuals and violence motivated by extremist ideologies. The political and economic importance of this activity has grown throughout the EU countries. Extremism is considered a very severe threat to the general sense of security and it has the potential to undermine the principles of democracy and the rule of law and to generate multiple negative social ramifications, along with human suffering.

Violent extremism and radicalisation: According to the national definition used in Finland, violent extremism “[refers] to using violence, threatening with it or encouraging or justifying it on the basis of one’s own view of the world, or on ideological grounds.” Radicalisation, in turn, is understood as a process that “may lead to individuals joining violent extremist groups or engaging in such action. At its most extreme, violent radicalisation can result in terrorist acts.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2016–2017 alone, Europe reported a total of 188 terrorist attacks that were carried out, failed or prevented. In 2019, the corresponding figure in the area of the EU Member States was 119. A total of 1,004 people were arrested for crimes involving terrorism in the EU, most of them in Belgium, France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. The estimated number of people staying in France and the United Kingdom, who are considered terrorist security threats, is about 20,000 per country. For their part, the German security authorities have estimated that of the permanent residents in Germany, about 11,000 are proponents of an exclusionary interpretation of Islam, who have shifted or are shifting toward violent radicalisation. Furthermore, support for far-right extremism is considered to be growing in almost all the EU countries.<sup>2</sup>

1 <https://intermin.fi/poliisiasiat/vakivaltainen-radikalisoituminen>

2 See High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R) Final Report 18 May 2018. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/20180613\\_final-report-radicalisation.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/20180613_final-report-radicalisation.pdf)

At present, extremism poses challenges at the local, regional, national and international policy levels as the EU countries strive to prevent and counter radicalisation and to supplement other counter-terrorism measures.

This report focuses on the following six countries that differ in terms of their extremist operational environments: the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and Finland. In some of these countries, the main threat of extremism arises from extreme right-wing, anti-immigration and anti-multicultural movements or those demanding white supremacy, whereas elsewhere the focus of attention is on extremist thinking and activity motivated by an exclusionary interpretation of Islam. The latter of these two threats is referred to as Islamist extremism in this report.<sup>3</sup> A severe security threat arises from both sides, especially in Germany and the United Kingdom. The countries concerned have also experienced the hurt caused by terrorist acts in very different ways. In Germany, Belgium and the United Kingdom, Islamist extremism has claimed several hundred human lives, whereas Norway experienced the worst extremist acts of violence in its history in July of 2011. A terrorist motivated by extreme right-wing, anti-Islamic and anti-multicultural ideas was held liable for the violence in Norway. Apart from a knife attack carried out by a Moroccan asylum seeker in August 2017, Finland has been spared the incidence of homicides committed for terrorist purposes. There were ten victims of the attack in Turku, two of whom lost their lives.

The countries covered by this report have also experienced the mobility of extremism in the conflict zones of the world in very different ways. German neo-Nazis in particular have been found to have travelled to international armed conflicts already in the 1990s, especially to partake in the wars of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and to defend movements that cherished the South African apartheid policies.<sup>4</sup> Since 2014, the conflict in Ukraine has also attracted foreign fighters motivated by extreme right-wing ideologies,

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3 When talking about extremism motivated by a narrow interpretation of Islam, the term jihadism appeared in the fields of both academic research and the media in the early years of the 21st century. Many researchers and media houses avoid the use of the term in the context of extremism because of the theological complexity of the concept of jihad. The notion of jihad covers both the spiritual struggle against sin and vice and the physical struggle to defend Islam. Some major Western media houses, such as the BBC, the New York Times and Washington Post, use the terms Islamist extremism, radical Islam or radical Islamism as alternatives.

4 Nenad Radicevic "We Are Their Voice": German Far-Right Builds Balkan Alliances. Balkan Insight, Oct 24, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/24/we-are-their-voice-german-far-right-builds-balkan-alliances/>  
Larry Thorson. German Killed in South Africa; Shady Links to Neo-Nazis at Home. AP News, March 25, 1994. <https://apnews.com/article/Oaad28e649550ba171047016e088ee25>

primarily from the Balkans but also from the rest of Europe.<sup>5</sup> The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) managed to create significant foreign fighter mobility in 2013–2017 in the conflict zones of Iraq and Syria and this phenomenon affected all the countries considered in this report. Numerically speaking, most of the leaving fighters were in the United Kingdom, but in proportion to the size of the Muslim population, the mobility of these people was especially significant in the case of Belgium.<sup>6</sup> Of the countries covered by this report, the foreign fighter mobility motivated by Islamist extremism affected the United Kingdom and Germany already in the 1990s when international conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kashmir attracted several hundred young people.<sup>7</sup>

One of the themes that have raised much debate in recent years is that analyses of the radicalisation process have over-focused on the personal level. Indeed, it can be said that the attention falling upon the prevention of extremism and radicalisation has shifted from individuals to the community dimensions of the phenomena. This in turn has had an impact on national prevention strategies. At present, all the countries concerned are implementing programmes where prevention focuses not only on individuals but families, background communities, schools, youth organisations and sports clubs. In other words, the overall social context surrounding young people is taken into account. Given the specific characteristics of each of the countries concerned in terms of its extremist operational environment, it is natural that there are also country-specific differences in the strategies for counter-extremism and prevention. Some of these countries are still evolving national support programmes, whereas others are implementing such through established cooperation structures formed by various organisations and public authorities. Of the countries concerned, Norway, in particular, has integrated the programmes into public social and youth activities with the various organisations playing a lesser role.

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5 Foreign Fighters in Ukraine. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/foreign-fighters-in-ukraine/>

6 The return of foreign fighters to EU soil. EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/621811/EPRS\\_STU\(2018\)621811\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/621811/EPRS_STU(2018)621811_EN.pdf)

7 Musharbash Yassin (2006) Die neue al-Qaida: Innenansichten eines lernenden Terrornetzwerks. KiWi.

Silber Mitch (2011) The Al Qaeda factor: plots against the West. University of Pennsylvania.



## Family as the key agent of prevention

The radicalisation of a family member hurts the family dynamics and the family's relationships with the surrounding society in many ways. Many experiences of losing resources fall upon the family as one of its members becomes radicalised. When a person becomes radicalised, the family must decide whom to tell about its concerns. Is there cause to inform the relatives and circle of acquaintances? What about employers and colleagues? In the case of a child who has travelled to a conflict zone, how does one inform the school or educational establishment, the institution providing health insurance, the bank and the population register? Can one ask for sick leave from the workplace based on the radicalisation of a child? If so, how should one submit the matter? In a crisis, parents easily shoulder a bureaucratic burden that seems overwhelming alongside the enormous concern for the child and their personal feelings of shame. The parents interviewed for this report described how after the radicalisation of the child they fell into a trance, as it were, where fear for the child's fate dominated every moment. One of the mothers said that for years already, she had concealed from her colleagues that she has a daughter.

For many parents, after having their concern focused on the behaviour of their offspring, merely being contacted by the authorities presents feelings of shock, stigma and guilt. In their efforts to support and help their children, the parents themselves can easily be faced with difficult criminal issues. Can they send remittances to those who migrated abroad? Will this be considered support to terrorism? Indeed, one of the interviewees described their painful situation after the bank terminated their client relationship and as they were rejected by other banks due to suspicious remittances.

Parents have to wonder whether the authorities are following their telephone and online communication or interviewing people in the immediate circle of the family to determine the overall situation. The situation easily erodes relations with the authorities, the school system, the police and the social welfare authorities—relations, which already may be fragile. So, it goes without saying that the ability of families to process the political, psychological,

sociological and ideological issues linked to extremism varies greatly.<sup>8</sup> In a stressful situation, it is crucial to get expert assistance. At the same time, we have to remember that families enjoying well-designed support can at the best be invaluable in identifying the early signs of radicalisation and thereby protecting their members from recruitment by extremists. Families can also influence the wider community's notions about extremism and help to build resilience, and present counter-narratives challenging extremist organisations.<sup>9</sup>

Radicalisation often takes place insidiously and unnoticed by the family. In a great many radicalisation paths documented in recent years, the relatives had no inkling that there was radicalisation in the family before the youth's act of violence, the authorities intervened or the youth travelled abroad intending to engage in armed action or support activities in the ranks of an extremist organisation. Often, parents sense that not everything in the young person's situation is quite right, but they have no overall understanding of the nature of the setup. The parents interviewed for the report had noticed changes in the child's behaviour, dress and circle of acquaintances. They had also experienced that the child had not spoken truthfully to them or had evidently covered things up. Finally, the news about the child's radicalisation had hit like lightning from a bright sky.

An ever-increasing number of radicalisation cases have revealed that parents lack information about their children's activities in the Internet and, in the first place, some understanding about the nature of digital extremist environments. Indeed, in the countries covered by this study, special parental circles are being held at present, whereby the participants can share their experiences in online radicalisation in particular and provide one another with peer support.

Some early signs of radicalisation, such as the cessation of substance use, increasing time spent at home or, for example, stronger attachment to religious observance, can be construed as positive signs. However, it is possible to train parents and the family circle to recognise some of the common feelings, thought structures and changes in the young person's behaviour,

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8 Initiative to Address the Life Cycle of Radicalization to Violence: The Role of Families in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Strategic Recommendations and Programming Options. Global Counterterrorism Forum. <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Lifecycle%20Toolkit-documents/English-The-Role-of-Families-in-PCVE.pdf?ver=2016-09-13-141058-860>

9 Supporting Families in CVE. Hedayah. <https://www.hedayahcenter.org/programs/supporting-families-in-cve/>

which are associated with the radicalisation of family members. Mothers often have the best possibilities of recognising, predicting and responding with counter-narratives to the challenges posed to the family by extremism, but very few mothers can do this without expert advice. Indeed, the interviewed mothers thought they needed some set “standard answers” to many questions. How should they view the young person’s desire to propagate his or her ideas within the family circle? What should they say when the young person tries to influence the religious opinions of family members? In a difficult situation in life, mundane routines can trigger unexpected frustrations and feelings of bewilderment. In an interview, one mother of a radicalised daughter revealed thinking she needed instructions on how to act when a casual acquaintance asks, “How’s your daughter doing?”

Mothers can act as channels of empathy to the young person while explaining the many dimensions of human suffering inevitably presented by violent extremism. Indeed, mothers and networks formed by mothers have played a key role in communicating the suffering experienced by families, especially in the cases of foreign fighters where young people travel to a conflict zone. Some of these programmes are presented in more detail in the section on the countries covered by this study.<sup>10</sup>

A significant proportion of the programmes, especially in the work to prevent Islamist extremism, focus on mothers and the establishment of peer groups for mothers. At the same time, there is a danger here that if mothers are considered categorical key agents, for example, in preventive policy programmes, they can easily be held liable in cases where a family member has become radicalised. The creation of stereotypes about an omnipotent mother, therefore, undermines the influence of women in prevention work and, above all, makes it difficult for them to reveal themselves or their experiences.

In the case of young adults with a history of being drawn to extremism, starting or planning a family, having a child, and the responsibility of parenthood often appear to form a turning point where the individual begins to re-evaluate the adopted values and choices.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the process of taking

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10 See e.g., Mothers for Life-network. <http://www.mothersforlife.org/en/about-us>

11 Initiative to Address the Life Cycle of Radicalization to Violence: The Role of Families in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Strategic Recommendations and Programming Options. Global Counterterrorism Forum. <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Lifecycle%20Toolkit-documents/English-The-Role-of-Families-in-PCVE.pdf?ver=2016-09-13-141058-860>

responsibility for spouses, children and parents seems to protect against violent radicalisation. At this stage too, support measures are often needed to encourage a person seeking to separate from the extremism to become more closely tied to the network of family and relatives or to rebuild ties if they were broken during the radicalisation process. Creating a social safety net and arranging matters related to housing and livelihood are especially important for those who are released from prison.

As stated above, the organisations and authorities operating in the field to prevent radicalisation take a holistic view of the social and cultural context surrounding young people. Consequently, very few preventive measures focus on family support only. The goal is to both stabilise the overall situation in the lives of people at risk of radicalisation and reverse the process of radicalisation. Families are one part of this whole. The key objective of the national strategies of the countries covered by this report has been to create clear case management chains to meet the needs of families. At the same time, the strategies have sought to raise the awareness of families about the radicalisation process, its early signs and the ways of intervening constructively. In particular, the specialists of the NGO sector are focusing attention on psychosocial support to families through mentoring activities and by creating various support and dialogue circles. A great many national and international organisations have been created by parents who have had to experience the radicalisation of a family member.<sup>12</sup>

## **Families as targets for recruitment**

Conventionally, extremist organisations have focused their recruitment activities on the social networks of young people. The fields of activity have included schools and educational establishments, religious communities, sports clubs and gyms, recreational activities, charitable organisations and, in particular, prisons and other penal institutions. Because intelligence and police authorities keep an eye on these kinds of facilities more closely than before, recruiters are turning to safer places, namely homes.<sup>13</sup>

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12 Pericles Family Information Portal. <https://project-pericles.eu/dealing-with-radicalisation-in-the-family-pericles-family-information-portal/>

13 Hafez, Mohammed (2016) The Ties that Bind: How Terrorists Exploit Family Bonds. CTC Sentinel, Feb 2016.

There were indications of this phenomenon already in the years gone by. The simultaneous radicalisation of siblings was usual, for example, in the Red Brigades in Italy in the 1970s. Similarly, in recent years, there have been indications from across Europe that intensified intelligence and surveillance in the name of counter-terrorism have encouraged recruiters to also use less visible forms of activity that are harder to follow. Indeed, in addition to the attention falling upon individuals, whole households may become targets of recruitment activities. Behind numerous recently committed terrorist acts, we find pairs of brothers (e.g., the Boston bombing in 2013, the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015 and the San Bernardino attack in 2015). An American survey of nearly five hundred foreign fighters from more than 20 countries showed that in the case of almost one out of every three fighters, the key supporter of joining an extremist activity was a family member.<sup>14</sup> According to the German intelligence authorities, more than one out of every five foreign fighters who travel from Germany is accompanied by a family member.<sup>15</sup> The cases of radicalisation taking place at the level of whole families have revealed that the families have often established strategies for staying beyond the reach of authorities, for example, by changing their family name or changing their place of residence at a fast pace. The examples of cases, especially in the United Kingdom, show that a lack of confidence between families and authorities can become an obstacle to effective prevention work at the family level. The work done in the name of counter-terrorism is in danger of undermining relations with the authorities and discouraging families from reporting risks or seeking help from the authorities.<sup>16</sup> They may perceive cooperation with the authorities as harmful or even dangerous. The keys to constructive activity are the stabilisation of the family's relations of trust with the local communities and local authorities and the commitment of the leading figures of the various communities to a common goal. Through these relations of trust, the preventive measures can reach a wider population and build relations with institutions, civil society and individual key figures.

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14 Peter Bergen, Courtney Schuster, and David Sterman (2015) *ISIS in the West: The New Faces of Extremism*, New America, November 2015, pg. 3.

15 Hafez, Mohammed (2016) *The Ties that Bind: How Terrorists Exploit Family Bonds*. CTC Sentinel, Feb 2016.

16 See e.g., *The Impact of Prevent on Muslim Communities*. The Muslim Council of Britain 2016. <http://archive.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/MCB-CT-Briefing2.pdf>

## The structure of the report

Structurally, this report progresses as follows: First, it is necessary to provide a brief review of the nature of the concepts of extremism and radicalisation. Although these concepts are still quite controversial in the field of academic research, this does not mean that researchers have no general agreement about many of the key issues. Since several distinguished overviews about these concepts have been published recently (also in Finnish)<sup>17</sup>, only some of the key themes of the scientific discussions are presented below. Of course, the academic definition of concepts involves more than workouts for the brains of researchers. If we fail to achieve a growing consensus at the national and international levels on what radicalisation or extremism means, then ultimately, we will not be able to define what countering or preventing them is either. Toward the end of this chapter, attention is drawn to the overall strategies and structures of prevention in the countries concerned.

The second chapter of the report briefly presents the extremist operational environment of the countries concerned and an outline of the nature of the national prevention strategy to be implemented there. Following this, the report moves on to consider the family support programmes implemented in each country, based on the interviews conducted and the organisation bulletins gathered for the report. The third chapter of the report provides a summary of the key themes and introduces a range of policy recommendations for the further development of family support programmes.

Before proceeding to the themes of the report, a few key points are in order. In the following pages, violent extremism is discussed as a phenomenon that is constantly changing, diversifying and globalising. None of the phenomena considered knows national boundaries. In all the countries concerned, extremist movements and organisations are part of a global network of interaction, the main channel of which today is the Internet and, in particular, social media. At the same time, it has become ever more obvious that many of the extremist groups of our time exist in symbiosis with one another. Opposing camps, such as Islamist extremists and Islamophobic groups need each other to exist and to organise demonstrations and counter-demonstrations that draw media attention.

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17 Malkki, Leena (2020) *Mitä tiedämme terrorismista*. Otava.  
Berger, J.M. (2019) *Ekstremismi*. Terra Cognita.

The report focuses attention on extremism and its prevention in two operational environments: Islamist extremism and extremism motivated by the heterogeneous narratives of the extreme right. There are serious problems with the concepts of Islamist and far-right extremism, which have raised much debate in the field of academic research. These discussions are explained as the report progresses.

It goes without saying that there is a whole range of other extremist groups in the countries concerned, such as leftist, ethnic nationalist and separatist groups, as well as heterogeneous single-issue movements. Although some European countries have programmes to counter them, the overwhelming majority of national strategies, and hence family support programmes, are presently focused on Islamist and far-right extremism. For this reason, the attention of the report is exclusively on them.

# PART 1: RESEARCH BACKGROUND

## Extremism and radicalisation

In general, the concept of extremism refers to extreme thinking, which dissociates itself from fundamental norms and values. According to dictionaries, in turn, extremism falls into the same concept family as fanaticism and radicalism. Insofar as extremist thinking leads to acts of violence, we can speak of extremist violence.

Extremist worldviews are typically strongly polarised, including, without exception, an ideological mental construct containing an inner group and an outer group that threatens the former of the two. In other words, extremist thinking builds essentialized identities and counter-identities considered threatening to them.<sup>18</sup>

No one is born an extremist, but extremists always have a change of notions, beliefs and values in the background. Research literature calls this change radicalisation.<sup>19</sup> Academic research approaches radicalisation as a personal, highly multifaceted process of change that is tied to the circumstances. Radicalised people turn out to comprise a highly heterogeneous range of

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18 Sageman, Marc. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3e7YRpqUFY>  
The emergence of terrorism, Georgetown University 28 November 2017.

19 See e.g., Kepel, G. (2004). *The war for Muslim minds. Islam and the West*. Cambridge.  
Kepel, G., & Milelli, J.-P. (2008). *Al Qaeda in its own words*. Cambridge.  
Khosrokhavar, F. (2005). *Suicide Bombers. Allah's new martyrs*. London: Pluto Press.  
Sageman, Marc (2004). *Understanding terror networks*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.  
Sageman, Marc (2007). *Leaderless Jihad. Terror networks in the twenty-first century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.  
Wiktorowicz, Q. (Ed.). (2004). *Islamic activism. A social movement theory approach*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.  
Nesser, P. (2004). *Jihad in Europe. Exploring the motivations for Salafi-Jihadi terrorism in Europe post-millennium*. Oslo: Department of Political Science, University of Oslo.  
Slootman, M., & Tillie, J. (2006). *Processes of Radicalization. Why some Amsterdam Muslims become radicals*. Amsterdam: Institute for Migrations and Ethnic Studies. University of Amsterdam.



personalities with highly diverse family, educational and economic backgrounds. Among them, there are both socially integrated and marginalized people, idealists and petty criminals, bookworms interested in extremist ideologies and adventurers looking for some excitement. Because of this heterogeneity, there is no all-powerful healing recipe for radicalisation, let alone for the prevention of such. It is simply impossible to predict who will become radicalised or who will have chances of separating from the extremist ways of thinking. Just as in the case of substance abusers, some of those seeking to separate succeed while others fail.

Radicalisation is far from a linear continuum of changes in ideas and attitudes toward violent behaviour. First, only a small minority of ideologically radicalised people commit violence. For most, their role consists of non-violent tasks, such as recruitment or strategic activities. Second, it should be pointed out that not all those involved in extremist violence or even acts of terror have radicalised ideas; rather, their deeds can be explained, for example, by group pressure or compulsions presented by circumstances, such as poverty or the threat of violence. On the other hand, engagement in acts of violence often triggers an evolution that leads to total withdrawal from mainstream society and a fixation with some extremist group because it is the only source of protection from the security authorities in the situation. Ideological radicalisation is often the consequence.<sup>20</sup>

Living as an extremist is a very tough career choice, tinged with social stigma, withdrawal, suspicion, the threat of criminal consequences and often violence as well, committed by “opposing camps” against the extremists themselves. Research data has highlighted the fact that each “inner circle” among the proponents of radical ideas is highly heterogeneous. When considered on the personal level, the motivations for engagement, the willingness to commit violence, and the commitment to ideological goals vary greatly. Radicalised individuals often move across the borders of various in-groups with flexibility and at the same time, they have the potential to mobilise individuals within their immediate circle. For example, individuals in the extreme right-wing circles of our time may engage in the activities of numerous overlapping networks, which are linked together by anti-immigration and anti-Islamic notions, neo-Nazism, criminal subcultures, white supremacy and ethnic nationalism.<sup>21</sup>

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20 Pisoui Daniela. Theories of Terrorism. Interview 13 February 2018. Talking Terror Podcast. Royal Holloway, University of London. <https://soundcloud.com/user-366747443/daniela-pisoiu>

21 Ebner, Julia (2020) *Going Dark - The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*, Bloomsbury.

Individual positions within the communities are not static either. Power struggles, open or silent criticism, doubt and frustration about the goals of the organisation, and disagreements about the traits of the ideology cause constant movement both within the inner circles of extremist organisations and at their external borders. People constantly join these organisations and separate from them.<sup>22</sup>

Invariably, radicalisation is set against a background of a range of root causes, such as feelings of deprivation, meaninglessness, futurelessness, short-sightedness, resentment and hatred, which in turn present the need to act for the elimination of the world's shortcomings. In addition to these causes, the backgrounds of many radicalised people reveal family circles characterised by emotional withdrawal, indifference or lack of contact with a safe adult.<sup>23</sup> The background of radicalisation may also include a ragbag of negative social experiences, often linked to discrimination, racism, social disadvantage, abandonment or interpersonal crises. Apart from the root causes, radicalisation invariably entails links to other groups and individuals that provide a kind of echo chamber for one's ideas.

## Extremist narratives

Extremist movements have a narrative dimension, which consists of a way to perceive the world and its prevailing shortcomings. At their simplest, narratives offer answers to the question of how unfulfilled needs can be met and shortcomings corrected.

The extreme right-wing narratives of our time are typically linked to the concept of nativism, which refers to the opposition of cultural impacts that are regarded as foreign.<sup>24</sup> According to the nativist narrative, the home country belongs to culturally and linguistically homogeneous, pure-bred natives: the original inhabitants with roots to their birthplace and cultural and religious tradition going back generations. Outsiders threaten this racial and cultural purity. Furthermore, most nativist movements are authoritarian. Order

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22 See e.g., Husain, Ed (2007) *The Islamist: Why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left*. Penguin Books.

Al-Berry, Khaled (2009) *Life Is More Beautiful Than Paradise: A Jihadist's Own Story*. The American University of Cairo.

23 Kruglanski, Arie, Bélanger, Jocelyn & Gunaratna, Rohan (2019) *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks*. Oxford University.

24 Mudde, Cas (2019) *The Far Right Today*. Polity Press.

and discipline, severe prison sentences and death sentences gain wide support and they are regarded as priorities for the stability of society. The diversification of the population is seen as leading to instability in society. Immigrants are regarded as invaders and those who are sympathetic to the diversification of society are identified as traitors. The agents of these movements hold that they are defending the continuity of the white race and Western culture. They may view any of the following as a threat: the EU that is pushing for a pluralist Europe, politicians promoting tolerance, authorities and non-governmental organisations, as well as activists, Muslims, non-white immigrants and refugees. Some of the movements of our time, for their part, identify themselves as guardians of the legacy of the German Nazi regime (1933–1945) and “Aryan” purity. Neo-Nazis hold that the rule of law must be brought down by a revolution and a regime like the Nazi Third Reich must be restored.<sup>25</sup> Far-right extremism is considered to have been growing throughout the EU countries over the past ten years. Some of the underlying factors raised include the financial crisis of 2008, cuts to the welfare state structures, increasing immigration, and the influx of refugees to the EU countries from the south.<sup>26</sup>

In turn, the narrative of Islamist extremism mainly builds on a setup where Islam and the Ummah (i.e., the Muslim global community) are viewed as targets of aggression. Depending on the historical context and the range of movements involved, the threat to Muslims is sometimes referred to as “tyrants dominating the Muslim world” or “Western Crusaders” and other times simply as “the West” or “Zionists”. The central idea is that the world is dominated by the immoral forces of evil, which deny the sovereignty of God, and which can only be responded to with violence. Muslims who have engaged in this resistance are the heroes of the narrative.<sup>27</sup>

Norwegian analyst Petter Nesser identifies three stages in the evolution of Islamist extremism in Europe. “From 1994 until 1996, Europe functioned

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25 Kruglanski, Arie. Right Wing Extremism in Europe: Case Studies from Germany. Recording ICCT Live Briefing 20 April 2020. <https://icct.nl/event/right-wing-extremism-in-europe-the-case-of-germany/>

26 Hallgrimsdottir, Helga. Far-Right Activism and the European project. EUCA Network webinar, 11 June 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVvGGoyRWbc>

27 See e.g., Kepel, Gilles (2002). *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. Harvard University Press.  
Cook, David (2015). *Understanding Jihad*. University of California Press.  
Stemmann, Juan (2006) Middle East Salafism’s Influence and Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Europe, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 10 (3).  
Roy, Olivier (2004) *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. London: Hurst and Company.

as an arena for local jihad”, according to Nesser. In particular, bases for the activity of Algerian Islamist extremist movements sprang up in many parts of Europe, especially the United Kingdom and France. At the second stage, from 1998 to 2004, people based in Europe engaged in the arenas for global jihad, especially those of Al Qaeda. The attacks were mainly aimed against the United States, Israel and, to a lesser extent, France, as well as against these countries’ military, political and economic interests around the world. Finally, in the third period as of 2004, Europe became completely intertwined in the global operational environment where European extremists are equally engaged in international conflicts as they are aiming violence against European societies.<sup>28</sup>

The public debate about Islam and Muslims as a particular set of political problems and about the way both of these have gradually become threats creates processes that divide population groups. These processes are highly similar throughout the countries covered by this report. The antagonism, in turn, offers extremist narratives opportunities to make an impact on new target audiences throughout the extremist operational environment. The message about the threat of “Islamization of Europe” finds resonance in certain target audiences, who then begin to form into organised groups and express their negative stances, also through violence from time to time. The criticism and hostility aimed at Islam, in turn, open up channels for the opposing camp to recruit Muslim youth affected by the experience of discrimination. Some of them become radicalised and the vicious circle is thereby complete.

## Extremist communities

No one becomes radicalised alone. Invariably, violent extremism is a communal activity. The community may be an established organisation but equally, this operational environment may build on independent underground cells, gangs or circles of friends, which act without any central management. A sense of community may also be formed through the actions of like-minded people who communicate in a virtual space where members do not know each other or even seek to meet face to face. The community is the fundamental prerequisite for the radicalisation process of the individual because it creates a self-empowering space for discussion where ideas

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28 Nesser, Petter (2015) *Islamist Terrorism in Europe*. Hurst & Company.

about the legitimacy of the narrative, the respectability of the activity, and the importance of the goal become emphasised.<sup>29</sup> The extremist activity provokes a great deal of resentment and fear throughout European societies. Thus, as pointed out before, in time, the social life of the radicalised individual becomes completely restricted to the circle of ideological brothers and sisters. For many, the group also provides security and protection against the hostility of the outside world.<sup>30</sup>

These factors, in turn, give rise to psychological reactions on the personal level that are very similar throughout the spectrum of extremism. The signs of an extremist scale of emotions include unconditional political values, fanaticism, as well as strongly polarised and exaggerated ideas. For extremists, the world seems to be on full alert and the prevailing conditions are perceived to require acute action. The ideology supported by the group offers the only rational way out of the surrounding crisis and the culprits must be challenged before it is too late. People who are dedicated to the issue often experience that they are part of a group of few and chosen heroes or martyrs whose mission is noble, worthy or part of carrying out the will of God, for example.<sup>31</sup> Invariably, the process of radicalisation means increasing social withdrawal in the case of young people.<sup>32</sup> Through radicalisation, they are distanced from their families, from their past friends and circle of acquaintances, and for this very reason, as this report presents later, the key to preventing radicalisation is ensuring the continuity of family and community relations in particular.

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- 29 Vidhya Ramalingam: Researching the far right. Interview 8 March 2018, Talking terror podcast. Royal Holloway, University of London. <https://soundcloud.com/user-366747443/researching-the-far-right>
- 30 Ramalingam, Vidhya. Researching the far right. Interview 8 March 2018, Talking terror podcast. Royal Holloway, University of London. <https://soundcloud.com/user-366747443/researching-the-far-right>
- 31 Kohler, Daniel. Radicalization and De-Radicalization. Presentations at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, 22 March 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCzrnXrjBYQ&>
- 32 See e.g., Bakker, Edwin, de Bont, Roel (2016) Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27:5, 837–857.

# ASSESSMENT OF RADICALISATION

In terms of countering and preventing radicalisation and extremist violence, assessing the threat posed by people or groups at risk is of utmost importance. Critical research in risk assessment methods has so far been limited, however.<sup>33</sup> Many of the existing assessment methods divide radicalisation into various steps, for example, ranging from harmless to disruptive, concerning and alarming behaviour. SALTO-YOUTH, a network that forms part of the European Educational Strategy of the European Commission, has created an instrument of its own<sup>34</sup>, where the first stage is related to general patterns of behaviour, such as a change in the level of ideological or religious conviction and the embodied (clothing, tattoos, hairstyles, a beard, etc.) or behavioural (diet, the growing observance of religious rituals, shifting to strength sports or the martial arts, etc.) changes linked to it. However, the activity stemming from the conviction at this stage is peaceful. At the second stage, individuals begin to communicate their attachment to a goal which, in turn, makes them change their behaviour more and more significantly. Their notions emphasise ideas of absolute truth, as well as intense unconditionality, polarised stances and paranoia. At this stage, the attitudes begin to produce rifts in family relations and within the immediate circle. Human relations are cut off and interaction is avoided on ideological grounds. This behaviour becomes concerning when these individuals begin to hide some of the traits and behaviour linked to their newly embraced ideology and sense of community from their family and immediate circle. They communicate or seek to communicate with groups and/or other individuals who are active in the operational environments of violent extremism. In the case of young people, this stage may be associated with traits, such as indifference towards studies or careers and varying degrees of attachment to the visible symbolism of the movement. At the extreme, alarming stage of behaviour, the individuals begin recruiting others or encouraging them to engage in violent

33 Augestad Knudsen, Rita (2020) Measuring radicalisation: risk assessment conceptualisations and practice in England and Wales. Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, Vol. 12, No. 1.

34 SALTO-Youth: Recognising radicalization. <https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3550/Young%20people%20and%20extremism%20resource%20pack%20for%20youth%20workers.pdf?>

activity. They keep in touch with groups or networks known to be violent radicals and strengthen their ideological conviction by following websites that encourage violence. At this stage, these individuals plan or engage in violent or hostile acts, inspired by ideological motives. They seek to acquire weapons or explosives or learn how to use such.<sup>35</sup>

The assessment of the paths to radicalisation should always be based on a thorough, empirical study of the traits of the extremist operational environment in the contexts where we seek to apply the assessment model. Models based on broad generalisations are easily in danger of producing false assessments and, in the worst case, fuelling the very phenomenon they seek to prevent.

## Counter-extremism and prevention

Nations have responded to violent extremism with a high diversity of strategies and policy programmes. The robust military measures of the early 2000s, such as the wars against terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq, soon demonstrated their ineffectiveness in the face of the security threats posed by globalised terrorist organisations. The idea that softer strategies for preventing extremist activity and separating from such could be successfully applied began to resonate increasingly on the international forums.

Because the threat posed by violent extremism is aimed against societies in many ways, the strategies for countering it are naturally highly multi-layered. Countering violent extremism is about safeguarding the fundamental norms of society, but also about prevention of harm and damage falling upon individuals, communities and the social infrastructure.<sup>36</sup> The programmes being implemented across Europe have many traits in common, but it has to be said that the strategies are shaped by the social, cultural and political conditions of each country. Views about the nature of the threat of violence, the most vulnerable individuals and groups, and the sections of the population at the greatest risk of radicalisation vary widely in the countries covered by this report. However, the basic setup of the strategies is quite consistent:

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35 Ibid.

36 Tore Bjorgo : GTReC Public Seminar Global Terrorism Research Center Seminar, Monash university, 31 July 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRflcUPZILw&t=14s>

extremists (including terrorists) are not regarded as deviants, sociopaths or psychopaths who were born as terrorists. The strategies approach violent extremism as resulting from a personal radicalisation process that gets people to commit violence that is justified by a certain ideological view. In each country concerned, the strategy is based on the notion that extremist ideas can be intervened with and changed, thereby protecting individuals, families and communities from extremism or bringing them out of such.<sup>37</sup>

The preventive exit programmes implemented in the countries concerned to support separating from extremism are building in a similar direction as well. These programmes seek to create a horizontal, confidential, multi-agency network, ranging from the central government level to the local community level, where each level from the state (e.g., ministries, security institutions and agencies) to the municipalities (e.g., social administration, the local police, health care, the school system) and local organisations has a clearly defined role. These programmes send a strong message about awareness that the wrong division of responsibilities may have damaging ramifications and undermine public confidence in the authorities and the NGO sector.

As stated above, extremism affects all society widely. So, part of the strategy of the countries concerned focuses on the whole population since a key part of preventive work is the safeguarding of fundamental norms, such as human rights, equality and democracy. Some of the measures focus more specifically on the groups and individuals at risk of radicalisation and their surrounding local community.<sup>38</sup> Because extremism has a very youthful face throughout the world (with the risk of radicalisation being at its highest among teenagers and young adults), preventive work especially focuses on young people throughout the countries concerned. Other measures, in turn, focus on individuals who are either behaving in a problematic or concerning manner or seeking to separate from the extremism of their own free will. This type of activity began in Europe in the 1990s when Norway and Sweden began to implement voluntary programmes for those who sought to separate from extreme right-wing movements.<sup>39</sup>

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37 Vidino, Lorenzo, Brandon, James (2012) Countering Radicalization in Europe. ICSR King's College London. Pg. 7-8.

38 Tore Bjorgo : GTReC Public Seminar Global Terrorism Research Center Seminar, Monash university. 31 July 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRflcUPZILw&t=14s>

39 Daugherty, Casie Elizabeth (2019) Deradicalization and Disengagement: Exit Programs in Norway and Sweden and Addressing Neo-Nazi Extremism. Journal for Deradicalization. Winter 2019/20.



Some researchers stress that in the case of those who seek to separate from these movements, a distinction must be made between deradicalisation (i.e. cognitive separation from extremist ideas) and mere disengagement. Naturally, an individual can leave radical and violent activity, but at the same time maintain a conviction tied to the radical ideology. There is a lively debate among researchers about priorities. Does deradicalisation entail mere disengagement from the operational environment or is separation possible only once the individual's thinking changes? <sup>40</sup> Is it a sufficient deradicalisation objective for the individual to forsake violent action, but perhaps still maintain radical ideas? Some leading researchers hold that a successful deradicalisation programme must be able to break the individual's bonds to both radical ideas and radical groups.<sup>41</sup> However, what is meant by "a change in thinking" in this context? At the personal level, extremist ideas are manifested as complex webs of interwoven notions. Is it enough, for example, for individuals to dissociate themselves from anti-Semitism and denial of the Holocaust, but to still maintain intensely homophobic notions? Indeed, the German researcher Daniel Kohler has suggested that in the case of deradicalisation programmes there is a great deal to develop in terms of both defining the objectives and evaluating the results. However, according to Kohler, the objectives must include a dose of realism: separation from violence may be an adequate objective in the case of people who have lived their whole adult lives within the circle of an extremist movement while in the case of young people at the beginning of the radicalisation process, successful comprehensive integration into mainstream society may be a realistic objective.<sup>42</sup>

Whether considering the question of what prevention means in the light of academic discussions or national strategies, it becomes evident that the issue remains largely open. At the level of national strategies, the stances taken are heterogeneous. For example, the Finnish and Norwegian strategies define the scope of preventive work broadly, with functions that include the safeguarding of citizens from both the activities of violent extremist move-

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40 See e.g., Horgan, John, Braddock, Kurt (2010) "Rehabilitating the Terrorists: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalization Programs," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22.

41 See e.g. Koehler, Daniel (2015) De-radicalization and Disengagement Programs as Counter-Terrorism and Prevention Tools. Insights From Field Experiences Regarding German Right-Wing Extremism and Jihadism, in *Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism Among Youth to Prevent Terrorism*, ed. M. Lombardi, et al., Burke: IOS Press.

42 Kohler, Daniel. Deradicalization, Talking terror podcast. Royal Holloway, University of London <https://soundcloud.com/user-366747443/deradicalisation>

ments and the ideas they spread.<sup>43</sup> In turn, the British national “Prevent” strategy was amended in 2011 to include non-violent extremist activity, “which can create an atmosphere conducive to terrorism and can popularise views which terrorists then exploit.”<sup>44</sup> In Germany, however, prevention places particular emphasis on “structures and procedures that strengthen democratic attitudes and ... a democratic political culture.”<sup>45</sup>

All this suggests that in the circles of both the research organisations and the authorities, we are still far from reaching a consensus on the indicators for evaluating the success of a deradicalisation process.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, it is often difficult to obtain independent data about the programmes implemented in various national contexts, which naturally makes it more difficult to assess their quality.<sup>47</sup>

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43 Action plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism. Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security. 2016

44 Prevent Strategy. Government of UK. [https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2015/9780111133309/pdfs/ukdsiod\\_9780111133309\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2015/9780111133309/pdfs/ukdsiod_9780111133309_en.pdf)

45 Federal Government of the Federal Republic of Germany, ‘Strategie der Bundesregierung zur Extremismusprävention und Demokratieförderung [Strategy of the Federal Government on Extremism Prevention and Promotion of Democracy]’, 2016.

46 See e.g., Barrett, Richard, Bokhari, Laila (2009) “Deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes targeting religious terrorists and extremists in the Muslim world: An overview,” In *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and collective disengagement*, Edited by Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, Routledge.

Koehler, Daniel (2017) *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, tools and programmes for countering violent extremism*, Routledge.

47 See e.g., Daugherty, Casie Elizabeth (2019) *Deradicalization and Disengagement: Exit Programs in Norway and Sweden and Addressing Neo-Nazi Extremism*. *Journal for Deradicalization*. Winter 2019/20.

# PART 2: PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND PROVIDING FAMILY SUPPORT IN SIX WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

## United Kingdom

### Background

Of all the countries covered by this report, the United Kingdom (UK) has been confronted with the most severe extremist violence. As a consequence of numerous terrorist attacks and criminal investigations in 2001–2017, the number of people sentenced under the country’s terrorist laws was 596.<sup>48</sup> According to the authorities, about 800 extremists constituting a severe security threat were in the country in 2020.<sup>49</sup>

Of the countries covered by this report, the UK has experienced the widest foreign fighter mobility toward international conflict zones. By the end of 2017, about 850 ISIS supporters had left the UK to engage in the activity of that organisation, especially in Syria. The extent of the extremist operational environment is also indicated by the fact that approximately one out of every

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48 <https://www.statista.com/chart/8667/age-uk-terror-suspects-and-convicts/>

49 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/emergency-terror-law-terrorists-release-prison-debate-a9330421.html>

ten of the country's inhabitants report that they have been victims of violent extremism in one way or another or that they are personally familiar with a victim. Based on opinion polls, 20-25% of the British think they understand why radicalism is an option for some people.<sup>50</sup>

The debate on the threat of domestic violent extremism was triggered in the UK as a consequence of the terrorist attacks that tried the USA on 11 September 2001. In December of the same year, a British citizen who had converted to Islam attempted to blow up a bomb hidden in his shoe while on a passenger plane enroute to Miami from Paris. Three years later, the authorities managed to prevent a terrorist attack by a group comprised of British citizens. London, in turn, experienced a series of devastating terrorist attacks in 2005, with a group of British citizens behind those incidents as well. This attracted tremendous attention and triggered widespread debate about the state of the Muslim population, the immigration and integration policies, and the building of counter-societies in the UK.

For years, the authorities of the country had been following the building of the Islamist extremist operational environment, but the threat had not been considered one falling upon the home country. Since the London attack of 2005, the authorities succeeded in preventing numerous planned attacks where both representatives of the native British Muslim population and converts were behind the plans. The number of criminal investigations related to terrorism increased from 250 cases in 2001 to 1,600 cases in 2006.<sup>51</sup>

In terms of terrorist offences, 2017 turned out to be the peak year in decades. At the time, five terrorist attacks were carried out on British soil, causing the death of 36 people and the injury of many others. At the same time, the police and the security and intelligence services succeeded in preventing 12 attack plans. The threat posed by the extreme right was also assessed to be increasing and in 2017-2018, the authorities succeeded in preventing four terrorist attack plans.

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50 Bellis, Mark, Hardcastle, Katie (eds.) (2019) Preventing violent extremism in the UK: Public health solutions. Public Health, Wales.

51 Vidino, Lorenzo, Brandon, James (2012) Countering Radicalization in Europe. ICSR King's College London, pg. 11-12.

# MOBILITY TOWARD THE SYRIAN CONFLICT ZONE

Before the Syrian conflict that began in 2011, only a few thousand people engaged with terrorist networks that operate outside Europe. After the Syrian crisis escalated, the European foreign fighter phenomenon suddenly grew from 2012 onward and over the next six years, an estimated 5,000 men, women and children travelled to the conflict zone. The height of this migration was in the period between 2013 and the first months of 2015.<sup>52</sup> Migration became a global phenomenon. The total number of people who left for Syria was 41,000 and they originated from 110 countries. Soon after its military victories and regional expansions, ISIS suffered serious losses as a consequence of international armed operations. By December of 2017, it had lost 95% of the areas under its administration and over the following months, thousands of fighters and family members had been lost or killed or had returned to their home countries or been captured by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and transferred to twenty detention centres and closed camps that had been set up in the area.<sup>53</sup>

As a rule, the authorities of the EU countries regard the repatriation and return of those who engaged in ISIS activity as highly problematic issues. The acquisition of evidence of the role of the returnees from the conflict zone, their potential criminal liability, the military and armed skills they acquired while in the conflict zone, and their potential to act as recruiters or models for others raise concern both among the authorities and the politicians, regardless of whether the returnees are imprisoned or allowed to live freely in their communities. An estimated 1,500 foreign fighters who had joined in the Syrian conflict returned to Europe by 2018. Some arrived disappointed

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52 Malet, David (2018) The European Experience with Foreign Fighters and Returnees. In Renard, Thomas, Coolsaet, Rick (ed.) (2018) Overview and Key Findings. Returnees - Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them. Egmont.

53 Cook, Joana, Vale, Gina (2018) From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State. ICSR, King's College London.  
How many IS foreign fighters are left in Iraq and Syria? BBC News Feb 20, 2019.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47286935>

or traumatised by the war experiences, but there were also those among the returnees who held on to their extremist worldview. The earliest returnees from the Syrian conflict zone were almost invariably spared criminal charges in their home countries because they were not considered posing a significant threat, but also because within the framework of the applicable criminal laws, the prosecution was relatively difficult. The situation changed in 2014 after a terrorist attack on a Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels by a person who had returned from Syria. The notion of a threat posed by those returning from the conflict zone grew exponentially. This, in turn, led to the expansion of the scope of terrorist offences under criminal law throughout Europe. The returnees, including women, began to be systematically prosecuted.<sup>54</sup> The general policy of the countries covered by this report is that the foreign fighters should not return, but that the countries will not formally prevent them from returning. There are considerable differences in the definition of terrorist offences between the EU Member States. Those who have returned from Syria have been prosecuted or subject to convictions in all the countries concerned, except Finland.

## The operational environment of Islamist extremism

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a group of people who had arrived in the UK and settled especially in East London began to work single-mindedly to instil a conservative, exclusionary interpretation of Islam into the Muslim communities of the country. This was far from a homogeneous movement. Rather, the groups consisted of a scattered range of activists, each with international networks of their own. The foci of organised activity varied from missionary work to fundraising, the creation of international relations, activity to recruit people to conflict zones, and support to the armed movements operating there. This setup produced a breeding ground for Islamism-motivated extremism which initially was aimed beyond Europe but subsequently at the UK itself as well. At the time, the British Government was aware of figures, such as Abu Qatada, Abu Hamza al-Masri and Omar Bakri Mohammed, who were active in spreading a radical message in the UK. However,

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54 Coolsaet, Rik, Renard, Thomas (2018) The Homecoming of Foreign Fighters in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium: Policies and Challenges. ICCT Publications.  
<https://icct.nl/publication/the-homecoming-of-foreign-fighters-in-the-netherlands-germany-and-belgium-policies-and-challenges/>

the Government considered their activities to be aimed only at the action in distant conflict zones (Afghanistan, Algeria, Kashmir or Somalia), which would not pose an internal threat to the country.<sup>55</sup>

Gradually, the notion of the authorities about the internal threat posed by these movements changed. North London Central Mosque (later Finsbury Park Mosque) was established in 1988 to serve the growing Muslim population of North London. In 1997, Egyptian-born Abu Hamza al-Masri, who had engaged in the conflicts of Bosnia and Afghanistan in 1991–1993, made his way to become the Imam of the mosque. He established an organisation supporting international fighters in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kashmir and Palestine and recruiting western Muslims to Al Qaeda and Taliban activities. Subsequently, numerous people who had come within Abu Hamza's sphere of influence engaged in extremist violence and an entire terrorist cell was considered to have been operating from the mosque. Three of the perpetrators of the bomb attacks that fell upon the London public transport system in 2005 had been within Abu Hamza's sphere of influence. He was imprisoned in 2004 and the mosque was placed under the auspices of the Muslim Association of Britain.<sup>56</sup> One of the core British groups, Al-Muhajiroun, operated in London from the beginning of the 1990s to the present day. Disbanded by the Government, this group organised numerous anti-West demonstrations aiming to create an Islamic state in Britain and some of the group members committed terrorist offences over the years. A number of group members and others who had been within the sphere of influence of the group leaders Omar Bakri Muhammad and Anjem Choudary also engaged in the movement of foreign fighters to Syria.<sup>57</sup>

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55 Burke, Jason. Investigative Journalism and Terrorism. Talkin Terror podcast. Royal Holloway, University of London. <https://soundcloud.com/user-366747443/jason-burke>

56 O'Neill, Sean, McGrory, Daniel (2010) *The Suicide Factory: Abu Hamza and the Finsbury Park Mosque*. Harper Perennial.

57 The group's relationship with violence on British soil was controversial. Anjem Choudary, the main ideologist behind the later phase of this movement, consistently emphasised that violence should not be aimed against the UK because the country was protecting the lives and property of the movement's members. At the same time, Choudary stressed that in the end, the decision was nevertheless a personal one. For example, in May of 2013, a member of the movement murdered British soldier Lee Rigby for terrorist purposes and in May of 2017, another member drove a van into a crowd of people and carried out a knife attack on London Bridge. Along with Al-Muhajiroun, Choudary was also active in other radical groups, such as Al-Ghuraba and Islam4UK which were banned by the Government, spreading the radical message elsewhere to Western Europe. See e.g., Michael Kenney: Al-Muhajiroun. Talking Terror podcast, Royal Holloway, University of London. <https://soundcloud.com/user-366747443/mikekenney-final>

Through their activities, Bakri and Choudary succeeded in motivating several generations of extremists. The movements did not comprise members who had experienced racism or discrimination as much as young people who were struggling with identity crises and dissatisfied with their circumstances.<sup>58</sup>

In 2007, the debate about the relationship between British society and Islamist extremism became increasingly heated. The media events of the time included, among others, the publication of the documentary “Undercover Mosque”, which had been shot secretly by the BBC 4 channel. The video showed material that revealed “problematic” Salafi communities, such as Birmingham Green Lane Mosque and the Essex-based Al-Nur Islamic School, spreading a message that strongly polarised population groups and religions.<sup>59</sup>

As the first decade of the 21st century began to close, an increasing number of young Muslims in the UK felt that they were objects of counter-terrorist attention from the state security authorities. In this atmosphere, the public discourse about Muslim youth tended to pathologise the identities of the young people and increase uncertainty and alienation.<sup>60</sup>

## **The operational environment of the extreme right**

Recent research literature describes the operational environment of the British extreme right, for example, as being characterised by a new hybrid right-wing extremism that has dissociated itself from the tradition of Nazism. These movements engage in cross-border networking especially with their North American ideological brothers and sisters, effectively exploiting the Internet for both the spreading of the message and recruitment activity.<sup>61</sup> North American groupings that emphasise white supremacy (such as the Atomawaffen Division which is linked to five homicide cases) have created connections with the UK-based Sonnekrieg Division which was declared illegal in 2020. In addition to white supremacy, another one of the main trends is linked to anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism and anti-Islamic ideol-

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58 Kenney, Michael (2018) *The Islamic State in Britain: Radicalization and Resilience in an Activist Network*. Cambridge University Press.

59 The document is available at <https://topdocumentaryfilms.com/dispatches-undercover-mosque/>.

60 McDonald Laura (2011) *Securing Identities, Resisting Terror: Muslim Youth Work in the UK and its Implications for Security*. *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 39, Nos. 2/3.

61 Goodwin, Matthew, Dennison James (2018) *The Radical Right in the United Kingdom*. In Jens Rydgren (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*. Oxford University Press.



ogies that appeared in society through the nationalistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the National Front (NF), British Movement (BM), the British National Party (BNP), and the British Union of Fascists (BUF). East London and the cities in Yorkshire and Lancashire became the centres of this movement. Of the successors of this tradition, the most visible groups in recent years include<sup>62</sup> Britain First and the English Defence League (EDL), among others. Their activity with its street campaigns and rallies focuses in particular on multi-ethnic urban areas that have experienced a sudden depopulation of the original inhabitants. These movements conceptualise this phenomenon as white ethnic cleansing and, for example, Britain First characterises part of the UK as an “area lost to the Muslims” and holds that the country is in a state of war.<sup>63</sup>

The characteristic trait of groups like the EDL and Britain First is that they exploit deliberate provocations against immigrants and the resulting publicity to communicate threats to potential followers. The stars of these movements, such as Jayda Fransen and Tommy Robinson, copy models from reality TV and vloggers, providing real-time footage of the country’s cultural and social decline. The video reports seek to stir up emotions in the “opposing camp” without the slightest effort to understand or engage in constructive dialogue. Indeed, the aim of the reports is only to prove in a spectacle-like manner the hostility and danger that stems from Islam, the Muslims and, more generally, from the circle of immigrants.<sup>64</sup>

In recent years, several people linked to the operational environment of the EDL and Britain First have been sentenced to prison sentences either for extremist acts of violence or planning such acts.<sup>65</sup> The most widely publicised acts include, among others, the murder of a politician known for taking liberal stances on immigration and a case where the perpetrator drove a vehicle into a crowd of people in front of a mosque.

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62 Mulhall, Joe (2019) Modernising and Mainstreaming: The Contemporary British Far Right. Hope not Hate. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/834417/Joe\\_Mulhall\\_-\\_Modernising\\_and\\_Mainstreaming\\_The\\_Contemporary\\_British\\_Far\\_Right.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/834417/Joe_Mulhall_-_Modernising_and_Mainstreaming_The_Contemporary_British_Far_Right.pdf)

63 Jayda Fransen: Documentary about Britain First. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIOEHU09wsA>

64 Jayda Fransen: Documentary about Britain First. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIOEHU09wsA>

65 BBC News, 23 June 2018. Who is Tommy Robinson and why is he in jail? Kevin Rawlinson. Britain First leaders jailed over anti-Muslim hate crimes. The Independent 7 March 2018.

## Preventive work

In 2018, the British Government considered that the threat of terrorism had increased throughout the second decade of the 21st century. The main issues of concern were linked to ISIS-motivated activity on British soil, but the threat of extreme right-wing terrorism was also considered to have been growing as well. The threat level of the country was assessed to be severe, which meant the likelihood of a terrorist attack. In its programme for the 2018–2021 term, the British Government announced that it had amended the counter-terrorism legislation to allow earlier intervention during terrorist investigations. This, in turn, had led to a lower prosecution threshold in the case of terrorist offences. Indeed, the prison sentences meted out in the UK for terrorist offences were now longer than in the past. At the same time, the Government allocated more resources to the reintegration of those released from prison. It strengthened information sharing between the various agencies and sought to increasingly aim support to preventive measures at the local level.<sup>66</sup>

The London terrorist attacks in 2005 raised wide social debate about the guidelines for countering extremism. The resources of the authorities and the intelligence and police agencies were increased and the British Government expressed the need to engage in closer cooperation with local organisations and Muslim communities to prevent the radicalisation of youth. The mainstay of this approach was the idea that socially integrated Muslim communities that have confidence in the authorities are more willing to cooperate with them and report any security threats they may detect. “Prevent”, the national programme for action to achieve these objectives, was launched in August of 2005 and it was integrated into the Government’s counter-terrorism “CONTEST” strategy. Funding for the programme rose rapidly from GBP 6 million at the start-up phase in 2006 to GBP 140 million in 2008. Local projects implemented under “Prevent” were launched quite rapidly and from the very outset, the programme was surrounded by strong public and political pressure. The British press considered the programme to be based on a vague notion of the nature of radicalisation and the meaning of counter-extremism. The conservative wing of the country’s political spectrum

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66 CONTEST The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism. Government of UK. pg. 31–42. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/716907/140618\\_CCS207\\_CCS0218929798-1\\_CONTEST\\_3.0\\_WEB.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/716907/140618_CCS207_CCS0218929798-1_CONTEST_3.0_WEB.pdf)

accused the programme of containing loose criteria for allocating support to the NGO sector and held that in the early phases of the programme, financial aid had even ended up in the hands of Muslim organisations supporting extremist thinking.<sup>67</sup>

In 2011, Prime Minister Teresa May declared that she had been left the “Prevent” programme by the previous Government in a form calling for numerous corrections. According to May, the programme had confused counter-terrorism with integration promotion policy and had failed to intervene with extreme ideologies. Furthermore, the Government strongly emphasised that the focus of “Prevent” was only on extremist movements and ideologies and that it was not intended to intervene in anyone’s personal religious conviction. At the same time, the Government declared that the programme would only finance and cooperate with organisations that would accept the fundamental values of society.<sup>68</sup>

Despite these policy changes, the so-called “Prevent Duty” was woven into “Prevent” as a supplement in 2015. In the framework of this amendment (which proved controversial), the State authorities were required to report to their superiors if they encountered any indication of radicalisation in their professional activities. Almost half a million public authorities received training for this duty. For example, teachers in British schools and educational institutions were trained to recognise the signs of radicalisation, such as changes in behaviour, group allegiance or religious observance. In 2015, more than two out of every three cases reported under “Prevent Duty” were focused on representatives of the Muslim population. Only 5% of the cases led to further measures. People within the Muslim communities widely experienced that “Prevent Duty” had abounded in negative consequences. Entire population groups felt that they had been treated unfairly and stigmatised because of their ethnicity and/or religion. According to the critics, a spirit of surveillance had enveloped the school world and it was feared that the intensifying feelings of exclusion would give rise to reactions among young people of Muslim origin that would make them increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by extremist organisations.<sup>69</sup>

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67 Vidino, Lorenzo, Brandon, James (2012) Countering Radicalization in Europe. ICSR King’s College London. Pg. 12-17.

68 Prevent Strategy (2011) Government of UK. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf)

69 Rethinking Radicalization. Al Jazeera Documentary. <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/radicalised-youth/2018/12/18/rethinking-radicalisation/>

Strong criticism by the academic research community fell upon “Prevent” as well. In July of 2015, close to 150 representatives of European universities and religious communities, along with legal experts, published their critical comment about the programme in the press.<sup>70</sup>

The view of the British Government was that despite all the criticism, the programme had made significant strides toward the removal of illegal terrorist material from the Internet. At the same time, campaigns had been launched, offering alternatives to extremist narratives. According to the Government, local projects and targeted support activities, in turn, had succeeded in significantly reducing the mobility of foreign fighters to the conflict zones.<sup>71</sup>

## **Family support measures**

The associative organisations, authorities and representatives of religious communities engaging in preventive work, that were interviewed for this report, stressed that successful work aimed at families entails a full understanding of the extremist operational environment. Hence, three key aspects must be taken into account. First, it is especially important to understand how some young people in each context shift from activism toward violent action. Second, safe spaces must be created for interaction with the customer groups and, third, those working with families must become thoroughly familiar with the social conditions of the communities concerned and their situation in life. To succeed, all this requires long-term cooperation with these communities. This is the only base on which we can build fruitful support measures and services aimed at the families.

One imam who has engaged in preventive action in Central England for over ten years spoke about knowing the operational environment. He held that practical fieldwork in Muslim communities poses numerous challenges. First, prevention entails cooperation with conservative Salafi groups that have dissociated themselves from violent action. According to the imam, the representatives of these groups are the very ones who have opportunities to move within the critical interface, where some young people begin to radicalise. The authorities have serious reservations about this kind of

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70 PREVENT will have a chilling effect on open debate, free speech and political dissent. The Independent 10 July 2015. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/prevent-will-have-chilling-effect-open-debate-free-speech-and-political-dissent-10381491.html>

71 CONTEST The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism. Government of UK. Pg. 31-42. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/716907/140618\\_CCS207\\_CCS0218929798-1\\_CONTEST\\_3.0\\_WEB.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/716907/140618_CCS207_CCS0218929798-1_CONTEST_3.0_WEB.pdf)

cooperation, however, since Salafi organisations are often seen as a gateway to radicalisation.

According to the interviewed imam, “After 2011, the authorities intimated that I could no longer engage in prevention work. The new conservative Government held that I represent Salafi doctrine and thus regarded me as an unsuitable worker. Nevertheless, this work must be done through those who know the critical interface. They are not necessarily liberal or democratic in their ideas, but they can bring individuals out of the risk area.”

The question about the role of Salafi activists in prevention work gained numerous comments, depending on the respondent. On the one hand, the interviewees held that preventive work must not cause a setup that automatically excludes the followers of a certain tradition of religious interpretation. On the other hand, some people suggested that the authorities must avoid causing a setup where the representatives of a certain movement would be seen as agencies with privileged roles in the field of preventive work. Indeed, it is best to address these strained issues through open dialogue that is as inclusive as possible.

The interviewees emphasised that society must create and maintain safe spaces where families, young people and entire local communities can address matters of concern to them, such as global conflicts, persecution and racism against Muslim populations, and especially the relations between the religion of Islam and Islamic extremism. According to the imam working in Central England, things become increasingly cramped in the UK with every passing year and at the same time, the extremist material is more and more hidden within the depths of the Internet. When a young person who has withdrawn into their room can be immersed in extremist material via their smartphone, it is very difficult for parents or siblings to follow the source material shaping the person’s way of thinking. The imam held that the Salafi communities of Central England operated in a much more transparent way in the 1990s.

“I was in the know about the young people in my area, what reading circles they visited, who they listened to and what books they read,” he said. “It was possible to challenge their ideas. Now the spaces that influence people are totally uncontrollable and so offering counter-narratives is constantly becoming increasingly difficult. Now radicalisation is mainly happening via the Internet.”

In turn, an interviewee who is familiar especially with the extreme right field held that compared with the case of Islamist extremism, the threat posed by the extreme right is even more difficult to trace: “When we draw attention to Islamist extremism, we know more or less which urban area to go to but with the extreme right, the situation is much more complex. Supporters of the phenomenon may be everywhere. For example, they can strike reception centres for asylum seekers from any location, including small towns. We simply do not know where or how to reach them or their families. In the case of the Muslim population, it is easier to build resilience because we can operate through the mosques and the leading figures of the communities.”

According to the interviewees, the third key factor which complicates family support activities is related to the range of problems and tensions that exist within the target families even before their young people become radicalised. Consequently, some families must be helped with psychosocial problems presented by the radicalisation of their members and simultaneously offered tools for processing the factors that led to the radicalisation of the young people in the first place. In brief, the workers must be able to intervene with both the causes and the consequences at the same time. First, families often have a whole range of social and economic problems at hand. In the case of many young people, the social and emotional tensions within the family and the serious interruptions in communication lead to a situation where the young person begins to look for a kind of “foster family” right on cue, as it were. This setup is often fed by childhood traumas set against a background of domestic or sexual violence, substance abuse or experiences of social rootlessness or racial discrimination. For some young people, searching for a foster family can lead to non-violent social activation while in the case of others, similar root causes can lead to radicalisation or a career in crime.

According to the interviewees, the root causes produced by the family circle are sometimes considerably less visible. The family’s social or economic position may be just fine. The quest for a foster family may stem from the parents’ ambitious, unrealistic expectations falling upon their children, which through the eyes of those children appear burdensome and distressing. Quite simply, the family backgrounds of radicalised young people are highly complex.

The situation is especially acute in families where the young person has travelled to a conflict zone. All of the interviewees emphasised that it is essential to convince the family as a whole that the services for the assis-

tance of families are not intended to evaluate or condemn their activities. The support person's role is simply to listen to the concerns and needs of the family members. The interviewees who engage with Muslim families also mentioned that they were seeking to find out by what sources young people form their faith. Furthermore, they are investigating what is at stake in the case of those who have travelled to the conflict zone. Is it a long-term relationship of faith or did the change in notions and faith happen suddenly? It is also necessary to understand that a young person who has travelled to a conflict zone presents a huge emotional load on the family and, thus, it is often impossible for family members to assume a logical approach to their experiences. Parents must be allowed to describe their feelings and activities during the time that the young person was in the process of radicalisation. According to the interviewees, a great many parents at this stage wonder how they could have intervened in the situation. It is often impossible for them to forgive themselves for the young person's concerns not having been understood in the family circle.

One person who has engaged with the extreme right described their feelings as follows: "Sometimes it is also good to let the parents hear that nothing could have been done about the matter. No one can watch their offspring around the clock."

Indeed, addressing the parents' sense of guilt requires particularly tactful empathy skills of the support people and authorities working with families.

The interviewees also emphasised the need to integrate support measures aimed at families into other key contexts in life, such as within the young people's peer groups at schools and in recreational activities. It is of the utmost importance that all these contexts support the development of the young people's interaction and dialogue skills and self-knowledge.

Reflecting on these thematics, one interviewee with a long background in the activities of the authorities and organisations held the following opinion: "In the case of young people, it works well to show why they need to participate in mainstream society. The cord to radicalism can be cut. Extremist movements offer a community and support network along with friends and comradeship. We intend to create an alternative community and that is why we devote efforts to sports. Ultimately, our activity is about assembling a team and creating new loyalties and bonding."

Based on the interviews, the most serious challenge to successful work is its discontinuity. Change does not happen overnight. One of the interviewees held that achieving results in a project focused on the local level requires a work contribution of at least 18 months: “In that case, we can engage with all the key institutions linked to the prevention of youth radicalisation. In 2018–2019, we got into a programme of the UK Home Office, where we were able to integrate family work with campaigns run at the schools. Together with pupils of primary school age, we could develop critical social thinking and teamwork skills while creating 10–12 weeks of family group meetings in the communities at the same time.”

According to this interviewee, long-term activities also enable the workers to gradually bring themes related to extremism and radicalisation into the ones being addressed. Furthermore, it proved highly important for this work to be introduced to both families and schools as “conflict solution and peacebuilding”.

The interviewee characterised the situation as follows: “We keep to a more general level of work and only in the long term, shall we begin to integrate the terminology associated with preventing extremism among young people and their families.”

## Germany

### Background

Germany, along with the UK, has the most substantial extremist operational environment of the countries covered by this report. It consists of a variety of groups, networks and organised movements motivated by extreme right-wing or Islamist narratives and left-wing ideologies.

In April 2018, the German authorities estimated that 760 people linked to the Islamist operational environment had the motivation and skill to carry out a terrorist attack. According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (German: Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BFV)), almost 26,000 people, who support Islamist extremism in one way or another, were staying in Germany in 2020. Many of these actors are linked to conservative



Salafi organisations that have about 10,800 representatives in Germany. The membership of these organisations has grown considerably through the first decade of the new millennium.<sup>72</sup>

Although Islamist extremism has been regarded as the main threat to Germany in recent years, it has to be said that the far-right field, consisting of heterogeneous agencies, is showing signs of high activity as well. According to official sources, there are about 12,000 extreme right-wing people in the country, ready to engage in violent attacks. The field of the operational environment is divided on the east-west axis. Even though only 20% of the population live in the area of former East Germany, more than 50% of the country's hate crimes are committed there. In addition to the movement of the extreme right, the eastern regions that are lagging socially and economically have created a range of active anti-Islamic, anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalism movements. Among the most visible of these is a network called the "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamicisation of the Occident" (PEGIDA). It was organised in conjunction with the refugee crisis of 2015 and has thereafter mobilised masses of tens of thousands of people on its marches.<sup>73</sup>

The changing security-policy situation has been reflected extensively throughout society. Following a series of terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS in Paris in 2015, Germany tightened its legislation aimed at Islamic extremism, for instance, by prohibiting travel out of the country for terrorist training. In the same context, Germany imposed tighter restrictions on the mobility of foreign fighters and expanded the legislation restricting the financing of terrorist activity. In 2017, the German Bundestag passed the Network Enforcement Law under which technology companies were compelled to counter hate speech, terrorist propaganda, criminal material and the spread of false information.<sup>74</sup>

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72 Germany: Extremism and Terrorism. Counter Extremism Project  
<https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/germany>

73 Germany: Far-right knocks on the doors of power. France24 Documentary.  
<https://www.france24.com/en/20171002-europe-now-germany-far-right-doors-power-afd-migrant-crisis-cdu-merkel-macron-part-1>

74 Germany: Extremism and Terrorism. Counter Extremism Project.  
<https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/germany>

# SALAFISM IN GERMANY

Being a conservative branch within Sunni Islam, Salafism in the world of our time consists of highly heterogeneous movements and groups that are united by a desire to purify Islam in both doctrine and the observance of faith by returning to the example provided by the Prophet Muhammad and the Pious Predecessors (Arabic: al salaf al salih). Salafists approach the Quran and the sunnah (i.e., the life model given by the Prophet Muhammad) strictly to the letter. In terms of their operating strategies and social and political goals, the Salafi movements differ considerably. Only a fraction of the Salafists can be classified as extremists.

In the case of Germany, the Salafi circles began to get organised at the beginning of the millennium as they set up a network of the national associations of mosques. From their very first steps, these organisations were an integral part of international networks that had ties with ideological brothers especially in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco and Syria. Many of the networks operated through the material, financial and doctrinal support of Saudi Arabia, especially in the early stages.<sup>75</sup>

In Germany, the Salafi movements devoted efforts to street missionary work that was for non-Muslims and, in particular, young people with an immigrant background. Indeed, Salafism became the fastest-growing Islamic movement in Germany in 2002–2008. Due to the missionary work, seminars, demonstrations, public campaigning and online activity, Salafism appeared to be considerably more influential than other movements of similar size. Actually, its followers account for approximately 0.1% of the total number of Muslims in Germany at present. The movement held that it represents true and “pure” Islam offering a new identity and community. In Germany and elsewhere in the Western countries, Salafi organisations aimed their message at young people searching for their reference group and identity. Until 2005–2006, the authorities did not intervene with the activities of

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75 Wagemakers, Joas (2016) Salafism. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion. <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-255>

the Salafists since the movements were strongly focused on spiritual rather than political activity. However, the German authorities soon took a stance on the Salafi movements, which was very different from that of the United Kingdom which considered that the overwhelming majority of Salafists did not pose any security threats and that peaceful movements could be used as part of the prevention of extremism. In Germany, the Salafists began to be classified as comprising a political movement and threat to a free and democratic society. Both the media and the authorities began following the representatives of the movement, leading, in turn, to its division into two movements, namely a peaceful mainstream and a radical one. The more visible the negative attitude of the authorities and the growing organisation of the anti-Muslim camps became, the more vigorously the recruitment work of the most radical quarters began to emphasise the persecution suffered by Muslims in German society. For Muslim youth, the Salafi movements offered a reference group and a channel for personal emancipation from the older generation's observance of faith. Young people were offered Salafism as a channel for identification with Muslims being led the right way and for making a clean break from mainstream society. Demonstrations and street campaigns organised by the movement's radical wing led to clashes with the police in 2012. From the German authorities' point of view, the question of whether Salafism forms a breeding ground for radicalisation remains largely open. The idea of a close connection between Salafism and radicalisation can be found in several German intelligence reports, but elsewhere it has been suggested that the demonisation of Salafism is detrimental to the work of preventing radicalisation. The voices of the latter kind remind us that most Salafi imams condemn the acts of violence committed in the name of Islam.<sup>76</sup>

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76 Viedl, Nina (2012) *The Making of German Salafiyya: The Emergence, Development and Missionary Work of Salafi Movements in Germany*. Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR) Department of Political Science Aarhus University, Denmark.

## Preventive work

In a little more than a decade, Germany has sought to develop the prevention of violent extremism by devoting efforts to the cooperation between the states and the Federal Government. This action model provides the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs, as well as the federal and state levels, each with a key role of its own. In this model, the police and intelligence agencies are in charge of countering extremist violence while the NGO sector focuses on prevention and support activities for communities, families and youth. In recent years, the work has gained growing political support, making it easier to finance the projects. Since 2012, the high number of prevention models and projects has, in turn, produced a growing need for national coordination and critical evaluation.<sup>77</sup> At present, Germany has 18 organisations or networks that focus attention on family support measures (in addition to other activities).<sup>78</sup>

The German federal system poses challenges of its own for coordinating prevention work. The German administrative structure consists of 16 states, each of which has a key ministry of its own for the field of preventive work. The states cooperate with the Federal Government and receive funds from federal programmes. The decision-making power of the states is quite massive and, to a large extent, this is the very reason why Germany has no formal, comprehensive national strategy against violent extremism. In Germany, countering terrorism and violent extremism is primarily the duty of the intelligence services (German: der Verfassungsschutz) and the federal and local police agencies. A separate counter-terrorism centre, the Gemeinsames Terrorismusabwehrzentrum (GTAZ), was set up at the end of 2004. Based in Berlin, it operates as a national cooperation and communication platform for those in charge of counter-terrorism. At the end of 2009, the GTAZ gained a working group of its own for prevention, comprising an intelligence service and police officers. Its role was to serve as a forum for federal and local agency specialists to exchange ideas, discuss good practices and poor ones, and devise approaches to prevention and deradicalisation.<sup>79</sup>

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77 Behnam, Said, Hazim, Fouad (2018) Countering Islamist Radicalisation in Germany: A Guide to Germany's Growing Prevention Infrastructure. ICCT Policy Paper.

78 Pericles Family Information Portal. <https://project-pericles.eu/dealing-with-radicalisation-in-the-family-pericles-family-information-portal/>

79 Behnam, Said, Hazim, Fouad (2018) Countering Islamist Radicalisation in Germany: A Guide to Germany's Growing Prevention Infrastructure. ICCT Policy Paper.

There is broad consensus among the agencies that approaches that take local circumstances into account are the ones most suitable for the German federal structure. In 2012–2014, the consensus began to appear in practice when several advice centres were set up for radicalised individuals and their families, both at the federal and state levels.

So, in a nutshell, the federal administration is in charge of the overall coordination of preventive projects, whereas many activities, such as the establishment of local advice centres, fall under both federal and state responsibility. The actual preventive work is largely at the responsibility of civil society. The most important civil society agencies include, among others, the Violence Prevention Network (VPN) in Bavaria and Hessen, the Association to Promote Acceptance-based Youth Work (VAJA) and its project, an organisation called Kitab, in Bremen, the ZDK Democratic Culture and its initiative, an organisation called Al-Hayat, in Berlin, as well as Ambulante Maßnahmen Altona e. V. and the Pestalozzi Children's Foundation and their joint project, an advice centre called Legato, in Hamburg.<sup>80</sup>

## **Family support measures**

Germany is implementing a very large number of local, regional and national initiatives and programmes that focus on preventing and countering extremism. Almost all the major cities have organisations focusing exclusively on the Salafi operational environment. The main overall objective of the local and regional programmes is to establish a support network comprising specialists and service providers.

Al-Hayat is an organisation founded in 2011 by the ZDK Society Democratic Culture (ZDK) and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). This organisation is the main German provider of family advice and support services, focusing on Islamism-motivated extremism in particular. Al-Hayat has offices in Berlin and Bonn and a national hotline offering assistance in themes related to extremism and radicalisation. The action models created by this organisation have set the trend in the German family support work sectors and motivated the launch of similar programmes in the other countries covered by this report. For these reasons, these models deserve more detailed attention.

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80 Ibid.

Al-Hayat provides anonymous advice around the clock. Even in its first two years of operation, it had served 53 radicalised young people whose cases varied in their security aspects and urgency. They included both activists of terrorist organisations and those who had planned attacks or engaged otherwise in illegal activity.

Al-Hayat activities are based on multi-sectoral cooperation between the police and the specialists and the organisation has points of contact in each German intelligence and criminal investigation department.

The activities start with an individual risk assessment created by a specialist group, mapping the customer's overall situation in life, based on tangible radicalisation indicators. The second phase focuses on risk prevention. If this involves a family with one or more members who have expressed an intention to participate in the activities of extremist organisations in a conflict zone, the support will focus on mapping the intentions and motives and preventing departure. The support seeks to encourage customers to engage in some alternative work that matches their motives the best. The alternatives offered often include study opportunities, humanitarian work or some other civic activism. At the same time, the wider family is advised not to put pressure on the person seeking to travel or to impose coercive measures on them. Parents must avoid threatening or imposing coercive measures on young people, as this may encourage them to leave suddenly.

If a family member is already in the conflict zone, Al-Hayat seeks to determine whether the person is maintaining relations with their family, what the person's job description is, whether they have engaged in violence and whether the authorities are already investigating the case. In addition to this, Al-Hayat finds out whether the family is already being followed by the authorities. One of the employees of the organisation seeks to act as a bridge between the family and the authorities and if necessary, to find legal or mediation assistance to meet the needs of the family. At this stage, some families also need family therapy services.

In the case of a relative who has returned from a conflict zone, the risk assessment considers whether the person has been involved in illegal activity, has established connections with terrorist networks or received armed training. The security authorities are usually there to meet the returnees already on

arrival and they carry out an initial interrogation. The activities for families focus on measures that strengthen the family's role in the separation of its radicalised member from the extremist operational environment. At the same time, efforts are made to get trauma processing and the prevention of the young person's future radicalisation underway.

Returnees who do not show a willingness to separate from extremism and are in penal institutions are referred to correctional treatment and deradicalisation work. At the same time, the family is offered support to help them make it through the situation. In this respect, small groups of families sharing similar experiences have proved to be highly effective tools. Sharing similar experiences stabilises feelings, the families' experiences can be integrated into a wider context and family members can express their problems, feelings of sadness and anxieties. At the same time, they can discuss the emotional, psychological and ideological dimensions linked to radicalisation.

In the Al-Hayat model, three to four families meet with experienced specialists who will express the ideological, practical and religious dimensions of radicalisation in a climate of trust. The case of each family is given equal attention and their notions are neither criticised nor condemned.

The processing of the trauma experienced by the family always begins with a face-to-face discussion with experienced, professional counsellors. A team of specialists will draw up a picture of the family's needs and objectives and set a realistic timetable for achieving them. The essential thing is to provide radicalised people with an alternative ideological framework, in which the family itself represents a living counter-narrative to the extremist one. This, in turn, entails that the family members are trained to understand the argumentation models and narratives used by extremists. The aim is simply to turn the family into an example that is an alternative to the sense of community presented by a radical ideology. In addition to these measures, the family members are trained in conflict resolution and the willingness to compromise, but so that the radicalised family member will have to challenge their black-and-white worldview.

The radicalisation assessment of customers is always based on a cross-disciplinary mapping of their social networks, ideology and potential security risks. Based on this mapping, the analysts create the first working hypothesis. In the case of non-violent radicalisation, family counselling will assume a role similar to family therapy.

In the case of violent radicalisation, the customer's motivation and reasons for engaging in the extremist activity will be investigated. At the same time, solutions will be sought for conflicts related to family relationships. If the family ties have been broken through radicalisation, it is necessary to restore and intensify them. According to Al-Hayat, the last of these has proved to be one of the most important elements of family work. At the same time, it should be pointed out that in many cases, it may be useful to strengthen the bonds with those sharing a similar religious background. It must be emphasised to the customer that leaving radical religiosity does not mean leaving the Islamic faith. It also has to be expressed, with emphasis on positive action and the importance of articulation habits, that the desire to change society is perfectly acceptable.

The BAMF Advice Centre on Radicalisation<sup>81</sup>, in turn, is the advice centre of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. It was set up in 2012 to provide services to all those who have been concerned about the radicalisation of someone in their immediate circle.

EXIT-Germany<sup>82</sup> has a field of action involving the provision of support especially to people who are separating from an extreme right-wing operational environment. To support reintegration, the activities of this organisation include various forms of cooperation with families, relatives and the other social surroundings of the person concerned. In addition to these activities, EXIT-Germany offers people who have already separated from extremism the opportunity to participate in mentoring activities to help others.

To mention another one of the agencies focusing on family support, Beraten e. V.<sup>83</sup> is a counselling and support organisation established in Hanover in 2014. It offers assistance to both people radicalised in the circle of Salafi organisations and their families. Beraten functions as a cooperation body, bringing together a range of Muslim associations, as well as education and social sector agencies. The activities are carried out in close cooperation with the BAMF. Other organisations with very similar fields of activity include, among others, Kitab, operating in Bremen and Al-Wasat, operating in Hamburg.

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81 The website of the centre is available at <http://www.bamf.de/FI/DasBAMF/Beratung/beratung-node.html>.

82 The website of the organisation is available at <https://www.exit-deutschland.de/english/>.

83 The website of the organisation is available at <http://www.bamf.de/FI/DasBAMF/Beratung/beratung-node.html>.



# Belgium

## Background

In proportion to the population, Belgium has the most extensive operational environment for Islamist extremism in Europe. Radicalised individuals, groups and networks have carried out attacks both on Belgian soil and across Europe. The fact that more than 500 Belgian citizens travelled to Syria to engage with extremist organisations operating there says something about the scale of this phenomenon.<sup>84</sup> Presently, about 160 Belgians are on the international list of people wanted for terrorist offences. According to Belgian internal intelligence, Belgium has about 1,000 people who have contacts with ISIS.<sup>85</sup>

Negative reactions to Islam, Muslims and immigrant minorities intensified considerably in Belgium as early as the early 1990s with the success of Vlaams Blok of an extreme right-wing party in the Belgian parliamentary elections. Based on this, linguistic usage that demonises Islam and Muslims took root in Belgium and became intertwined with exclusionary Flemish nationalism and open racism. At the same time, second and third-generation Muslim immigrants also began to mobilise politically. As far back as the 1990s, radicalised people with cross-border networks had settled in Belgium, building relations, especially with the extremists of Algeria, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. By the early 2000s, it was evident that this would lead to the intensifying polarisation of population groups.<sup>86</sup>

The Muslim population in Belgium accounts for 6% of the country's total population, making its proportion second only to France in the whole EU area. The Muslim population in the EU countries is typically strongly concentrated in a few major cities: in the case of Belgium, in Brussels and Antwerp. In the light of research, the problems related to integration appear

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84 Teich, Sarah (2016) Islamic Radicalization in Belgium. International Institute for Counter Terrorism. <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1595/Islamic-Radicalization-In-Belgium#gsc.tab=0>

85 Security Specialist Thomas Renard. Terror in Brussels, Sky News. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijiw7NwusMw>

86 Zemni, Sami (2011) The Shaping of Islam and Islamophobia in Belgium. Race & Class, Vol.53, No. 1.

quite serious. Many Muslim young people identify themselves more in their parents' country of origin than in Belgium. More than two out of every three teenagers and young adults struggle with the questions of social acceptance and almost 50% of them hold that they have personally experienced racism. A little more than one out of every three Muslim young people with Belgian citizenship regard themselves as foreigners in Belgium.<sup>87</sup>

## **The operational environment of Islamist extremism**

In the case of Belgium, recruitment to the movements operating in the Syrian and Iraqi conflict zone essentially happened through networks led by three charismatic people, Fouad Belkacem, Khalid Zerkani and a convert to Islam, Jean Lous Denis. Fouad Belkacem's movement Sharia4Belgium was born in the United Kingdom under the inspiration of Omar Bakri and Anjem Choudary, the imams who had engaged with Al-Muhajiroun. Choudary had got Islam4UK off the ground and the organisation soon landed in Belgium as a motivating force. The objective of the movement was to enforce an extremely conservative notion of Islamic Sharia in Belgium. By March of 2013, at least 70 members or supporters of Saria4Belgium were actively fighting in Syria. Shortly after this, the Belgian authorities disbanded the movement.<sup>88</sup>

Saria4Belgium activity mainly focused on the cities of Antwerp and Vilvoorde, where members engaged in visible street missionary work under the leadership of Imam Fouad Belkacem. The movement is estimated to have recruited at least 101 people to the extremist movements of the Syrian conflict zone, mainly ISIS. Sharia4Belgium was active in social media and could persuade young people from a variety of backgrounds, soon producing extremist stars of its own. One of the most important of these, Houssein el-Ouassaki from the city of Vilvoorde, succeeded in inspiring several young people of Antwerp and Vilvoorde to join the front. Fouad Belkacem had already been sentenced to prison for numerous hate crimes in 2012 before the start of the most intensive recruitment phase. Subsequently, Belkacem together with 45 members of the movement were sentenced to 12 years in prison for terrorist activity. The movement's activity continued through Resto Du Tawheed, a movement that was under the leadership of convert

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87 Marthe van der Wolf, Projects for Belgium's Molenbeek Kids Give Them Goals Instead of Extremism. VOA news 16 Sept 2016. [Projects for Belgium's Molenbeek Kids Give Them Goals Instead of Extremism | Voice of America - English \(voanews.com\)](https://www.voanews.com/news/Belgium-Molenbeek-Kids-Give-Them-Goals-Instead-of-Extremism-160916-1111)

88 Teich, Sarah (2016)

Jean-Louis Denis. This movement has been characterised as a network of “gangster-jihadists”. When operating around the Brussels-North railway station, it succeeded in recruiting socially marginalised people and petty criminals in particular. Denis is estimated to have recruited at least 63 people to the Syrian-Iraqi zone before being sentenced to prison in 2013. Imam Khalid Zerkani, too, had a similar target audience. He aimed his message especially at the marginalised youth of the Molenbeek district in Brussels. Zerkani is known to have offered up to EUR 6,000 in cash to people intending to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq. He is considered to have inspired several extremists acting in the name of ISIS, who carried out the attacks in Paris in November of 2015 and Brussels in March of 2016. At its largest, the number of members in Zerkani’s network is estimated to have been at least 85. In the spring of 2016, Zerkani was sentenced to 15 years in prison for his activities.<sup>89</sup>

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89 Khalid Zerkani. Counter Extremism Project  
<https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/khalid-zerkani>  
Belgian court sentences Jihadist recruiter to 15 years in prison. France 24, 14 April 2014.  
<https://www.france24.com/en/20160414-belgium-appeals-court-sentences-khalid-zerkani-15-years-prison>

# EXTREMISM AND GENDER: THE INCEL MOVEMENT

The operational environments of the extremists of our time are intensely gender-biased, with their distinctive features and conservative notion of gender and gender roles. Sexism, homophobia and the notion of a hierarchy of values between women and men for the benefit of the man came out strongly in the movement toward Syria. Men were recruited to the process of building a caliphate, with the role of women being limited mainly to supporting tasks and raising the next generation of fighters. A strongly divided notion of gender is also an integral part of the far-right extremist operational environment of our time.<sup>90</sup>

The movements supporting white supremacy and the so-called incel (i.e., involuntary celibacy) movements in the United States, as well as their ideological brothers in Europe, lean on views that the empowerment of anti-racist movements, women's movements, and gay and lesbian movements is a direct attack against the white heterosexual man. The white man's privilege has been challenged but at the same time, the incel movement's supporters hold that they are the heirs of the heroic white man's imperialist legacy. So, the white man has a natural right to power, but this setup is threatened. Indeed, men are seen as both authorities and victims simultaneously. Women and representatives of the non-white race are a threat because they no longer accept their status as subordinate to the white man.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, men have the responsibility of protecting the white woman because ensuring the continuity of the "natural" gender system is at stake. Views of this kind blend together biological and cultural gender. According to this idea, communities throughout the world should be built of heterosexual men and women while all alternative ways of realising gender are deviant and unnat-

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90 Mattheis, Ashley. Constructing Ideal Masculinity in Manosphere and Far Right Online Cultures. ICCT Live Briefing Recording 4 June 2020: Gender and Violent Extremism Today. <https://icct.nl/event/icct-live-briefing-gender-and-violent-extremism-today/>

91 Ferber, Abby, Kimmel, Michael (2008) The Gendered Face of Terrorism. *Sociology Compass* 2/3.

ural, eroding social order.<sup>92</sup> In recent years, some leading figures of these movements (including women) have also emerged, who may—depending on the situation—emphasise the feminism of the groups they represent and an open relationship with sexuality when it serves their interests.<sup>93</sup> This type of rhetoric is often raised, for example, when inciting hostility toward Muslim populations by proclaiming the female hatred and homophobia of Islam.<sup>94</sup>

## The operational environment of the extreme right

Although the Belgian public debate about violent extremism revolves highly around Islamist extremism, an extensive movement of right-wing populists has been building especially in the Flemish-speaking regions of Belgium for three decades already. In recent years, this has also caused strong anti-Islam, anti-Muslim and anti-immigration reactions.

Of the situations in the countries covered by this report, the one in Belgium is exceptional in that this country has a broad, largely mainstreamed populist political wing while the far-right extremist operational environment is quite limited in size. One of the most prominent of the neo-Nazi organisations, Bloed, Bodem, Eer en Trouw, was initially formed in 2004 as part of the international Blood and Honour network. In September of 2006, 17 of its members were arrested for planning terrorist acts in addition to committing racist and anti-Semitic offences. The case was widely publicised since most of the suspects were serving in the Belgian army.<sup>95</sup> Far-right extremists have not been guilty of any violence against the civilian population on a massive scale in recent years.

The polarisation of society on issues concerning Islam, Muslims and immigration has the potential to cause severe social tensions which could erupt into future anti-Muslim hate crimes and more organised violence.

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92 Mattheis, Ashley. Constructing Ideal Masculinity in Manosphere and Far Right Online Cultures. ICCT Live Briefing Recording 4 June 2020: Gender and Violent Extremism Today.  
<https://icct.nl/event/icct-live-briefing-gender-and-violent-extremism-today/>

93 Mudde, Cas (2019) *The Far Right Today*. Polity Press. Pg. 148-149.

94 See e.g., Documentary about Jayda Fransen & Britain First.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2nNziaUq5k>

95 Belgian neo-Nazis in 'terror plot'. *Guardian*. 8 September 2006  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/08/nicholaswatt.mainsection>

For many years already, Belgian legislation has clearly been building in an increasingly repressive direction in its relationship with Islamic symbols in official contexts, educational institutions and working life. Since 2011, Belgian law has prohibited the wearing of any clothing that covers all or part of the face in places considered as public spaces.<sup>96</sup> For a violation of this law, the police can impose fines or a prison sentence of one to seven days. The debate about Islam revolves first and foremost around women, hijabs, burqas and other veils. Most cities in the Flanders region have local rules and regulations that prohibit women working in the administration from wearing any headscarf that covers the hair. Most schools in the region prohibit both teachers and students from wearing headscarves.<sup>97</sup>

## **Preventive work**

In Belgium, the model for preventing and countering extremism is based on a horizontal, non-hierarchical structure where the roles are divided among the federal and local police, the intelligence service, the Federal Public Service Interior, the Federal Public Service Justice, the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, the Federal Public Service Finance, the local government, public research institutions, social services, representatives of education systems, and communities. The model also involves a whole range of independent agencies, such as grassroots organisations and local and municipal projects. The Belgian Federal Government is in charge of the more robust methods of counter-extremism, whereas prevention falls almost exclusively under the responsibility of the community and regional levels. The complex Belgian administrative structure, consisting of an ensemble of federal, regional and municipal agencies and German, Flemish or French language communities, poses challenges of its own for countering and preventing extremism. The definition of key concepts is not consistent in the German, French and Flemish-speaking regions, which makes cooperation between public authorities and the agencies more difficult. The municipal cooperation network consists of 30 municipalities that inform one another, the local authorities and the NGO sector about good practices, seeking to create common guidelines on countering and

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96 Belgian face veil ban backed in European court ruling. BBC News. 11 July 2017  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40567422>

97 Zemni, Sami (2011) The Shaping of Islam and Islamophobia in Belgium. *Race & Class*, Vol.53, No. 1.

prevention.<sup>98</sup> Because the situation with violent extremism varies greatly between the various regions, local authorities have had difficulties in applying the general guidelines to the contexts of their own. For example, the Belgian foreign fighter phenomenon was largely confined to the Brussels-Antwerp axis without affecting the southern parts of Wallonia.<sup>99</sup>

Indeed, the strengthening of information exchange, joint training sessions, and the harmonisation of grassroots programme assessment emerge as the key areas calling for development measures.

## Family support

One of the most prominent organisations focusing on family support is SAVE Belgium, set up by Saliha Ben Ali in 2015.<sup>100</sup> It especially focuses on both the individuals hurt by the foreign fighter phenomenon and Islamist extremism, as well as their families. Ben Ali's son became radicalised, travelled to Syria and died in the conflict zone only three months after his departure in 2013. The better part of the SAVE Belgium operations is intended for the families' mothers, who share Ben Ali's experiences. The programmes seek to enhance the mothers' skill to process feelings of shame that can easily isolate families from the circle of support provided by their relatives, neighbours and social workers. Simultaneously, the organisation enhances the families' mothers' knowledge about the early signs of radicalisation and the ways of opening discussions with the children about racism, social disadvantage and other factors that may burden the home and expose one to extremism.<sup>101</sup>

In the case of Ben Ali's son, the radicalisation process involved numerous behavioural changes, the seriousness of which the family members did not know how to recognise. The boy had given up his pursuit of sports, watching television and listening to music, and had restricted his circle of friends only to Muslims observing their religion. Moreover, he had begun to put pressure on family members to "Islamise" their behaviour and move away from Bel-

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98 Van der Vet, Irina, Coolsaet, Rik (2018) The Belgian Approach to Tackling Violent Radicalization: The Practitioner's Perspective. Institute for European Studies. <https://www.ies.be/node/4840>

99 Van Ostaejen, Pieter (2019) State of Terror: The History and Influence of the Belgian ISIS Contingent. Conference paper, 3rd conference of the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) Advisory Network on terrorism and propaganda, 9-10 April 2019, at Europol Headquarters, The Hague. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/history-and-influence-of-belgian-isis-contingent>

100 The website of the organisation is available at <https://savebelgium.org/>.

101 <https://savebelgium.org/les-objectifs/>

gium, a country whose legislation is not based on Islamic doctrines. In her numerous media interviews, Ben Ali describes having experienced pressure from the Muslim community as she has sought to share her experiences and educate mothers about the dangers of radicalisation. In the community's experience, she was only increasing prejudice against Muslims by her actions. Some of the leading figures in the Muslim organisations of Belgium, in turn, held that the foreign fighter phenomenon went back to poor upbringing. Due to this kind of feedback, Ben Ali turned to the authorities and politicians and gained support for her plans to set up an organisation that builds family support measures. Workshops for mothers were launched in 2015 and they consist of ten sessions each with 12–15 participants invited to attend. The first four sessions focus on the mothers and their experiences. These sessions map the participants' backgrounds, living conditions, relationships with the children, and their foremost feelings at present about what they have experienced. The aim is to first get the mothers to set themselves at the centre of everything and listen to their feelings. Only after this shall attention be focused on the radicalised child. In Ben Ali's view, it is extremely important for mothers to learn to reflect on their personal experience and not focus their attention only on the family members. Only when mothers learn to understand themselves can they internalise many other aspects of family dynamics. According to Ben Ali, it is impossible to resolve the sore points of the mother-child relationship if the mother does not first give priority to her personal world of experience and emotion. It is also essential to make the family's other children understand that they are not responsible for the radicalisation of their sibling. Indeed, Ben Ali holds that she has always told her children that "they have done nothing wrong and that they should never be ashamed of what happened. Society tries to make them feel guilty as if they were responsible for what happened, but they are not responsible for anything."<sup>102</sup>

Khalid Zerkani and Jean-Louis Denis (introduced above) were behind the radicalisation of Ben Ali's son, engaging in long-term street missionary work at the Brussels-North railway station. According to Ben Ali, the city authorities were aware of the extremist message being spread on the streets but did not intervene. In addition to the work focusing on mothers, SAVE Belgium

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102 Ben Ali, Saliha (2017) Saving Families from Our Fate. *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 3.



provides information for the youth organisations, sports clubs, schools and educational institutions and engages in dialogue with them about marginalisation, hate speech, violence and radicalisation. The target audience comprises young people aged 11–20. Depending on the case, some of the actors within the organisation provide psychological and legal support to people who have become the victims of extremism in one way or another.<sup>103</sup>

Long-standing Imam Radwan Safti, who has engaged in the Belgian work with families and youth to prevent and counter extremism, emphasises the primary importance of giving foreign fighters who have returned to Belgium the opportunity to tell others in their own words about the factors that led to their decision of travelling. According to Safti, young people usually begin by saying that they love their religion and simply wanted to live in a state (the ISIS “caliphate”) that implements Sharia. It is only as the discussions deepen that the young people, nonetheless, begin to raise social and family circle problems in particular. Indeed, the experiences of injustice and racism, poverty and tensions in family relationships become the main topics instead of life under Sharia. In the Belgian context, Safti indeed emphasises the factors associated with the search for identity, the lack of appreciation, and the challenges of becoming accepted rather than ideological or theological issues. According to Safti, it was this very emotional scale to which ISIS was able to draw its attention and market to perfection the idea of a dream state of equality, free of racism and discrimination. Safti’s approach emphasises unbiased listening to young people’s needs, understanding them comprehensively, and taking them into consideration. At the same time, he emphasises the importance of holistic cooperation with psychologists, psychiatrists, and specialists in the field of prevention and deradicalisation.

According to Safti, “The young person (convicted of a terrorist offence) must not be left in the hands of the imam alone. Mere theological religious guidance will not help. A great many of those who have gone to the conflict zone are not at a level of theological awareness where such a conversation would be of help to them.”<sup>104</sup>

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103 Ibid.

104 Can isis terrorist be rehabilitated into society? ICSVE Webinar, June 10, 2020.

<https://www.icsve.org/can-an-isis-terrorist-be-rehabilitated-and-reintegrated-into-society/>

# Netherlands

## Background

In the case of the Netherlands, the measures to prevent and counter terrorism are tied first and foremost to Islamism-motivated extremism. According to the General Intelligence and Security Service (Algemene Inlichtingen Veilighidsdienst (AIVD)), the Islamism-motivated operational environment has seen strong growth since 2013. In the Netherlands, the extreme right operational environment, in turn, is characterised as limited with the threat estimations mainly falling upon lone individuals, albeit ones who are networked online. According to the AIVD, the number of websites spreading the message of Islamism-motivated extremism has grown exponentially since 2013. Indeed, the AIVD holds that some of the Muslim young people of the Netherlands are at risk of being recruited into cells that carry out attacks on European soil. The extremist organisations have also shown that they seek to recruit asylum seekers and refugees who have arrived in the Netherlands in recent years.<sup>105</sup>

## The operational environment of Islamist extremism

Islamist networks began to activate in the Netherlands in the early 1990s. Compared with the United Kingdom and Germany, Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb al-Tahrir and Takfir Wa Hijra, had had little activity in the Netherlands. Gradually, a Salafi operational environment had been built, touching the immigrant population of North African origin in particular as far back as the 1980s. Mainly with the help of Saudi donors, the first Salafi mosques had been established in Amsterdam, Eindhoven, The Hague and Tilburg. As in Germany and the United Kingdom, the Salafi organisations in the Netherlands had also devoted efforts to street missionary work, seeking to provide answers to the social problems of Muslim youth with immigrant backgrounds. The message was summed up in the idea that Muslims are systematically prohibited from observing an Islamic lifestyle. Especially young people with a Moroccan background had begun to express the need to return to the teachings of Islam perceived as original, thus purifying Islam of both the Moroccan cultural traditions and the

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105 The Netherlands: Extremism and Terrorism.  
<https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/netherlands>

influence of Dutch culture. According to official estimates, until the turn of the millennium, these movements attracted a few thousand followers but were not considered having posed any significant security threats. However, the early years of the 2000s began to show signs that young people within the Salafi organisations were gravitating to international conflict zones. By the end of 2004, the AIVD estimated that the Netherlands had 100–200 people posing a potential security threat to the country. The concern about the radicalisation of young people grew when in November of 2004, Amsterdam-born Mohammed Bouyeri murdered Theo van Gogh, a well-known Dutch filmmaker who had criticised Islam. Bouyeri's background revealed connections with the Dutch Salafi mosques and soon the Salafi movement became the main target of the counter-terrorism and radicalism efforts of the Dutch authorities. Indeed, after 2004, the authorities began to have foreign Salafi leaders expelled from the Netherlands, to intensify the surveillance falling upon these movements and concentrate those convicted of terrorist offences in a special wing of the Vutlight prison. More than 80 people have been sentenced to various lengths of imprisonment over the years.<sup>106</sup>

Some of the Salafis dissociating themselves from extremism began a dialogue with the authorities as a consequence of the incidents of 2004. As a result of this cooperation, the authorities understood that there were actors within the Salafi organisations, too, for whom a role could be built in the work to prevent extremism. Already by 2007, the Dutch security services indicated that the Salafi organisations posed no direct threat of violence.<sup>107</sup> However, the most radical Salafi wing began to activate as of 2012, following the rich media coverage of the Syrian conflict. According to the Dutch authorities, the following of violent jihadism grew from a few dozen to more than 200 in 2013–2016. According to official estimates, about 220 people from the Netherlands engaged in the movement toward Syrian and Iraqi territory. The phenomenon was largely similar to that in Belgium. At the time of departure, the majority were unmarried young people a little over 20 years

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106 See De Graaf, Beatrice (2010) *The Nexus Between Salafism and Jihadism in the Netherlands*. CTC Sentinel, Vol. 3 No. 3.

De Koning, Martijn (2008) *Ambivalent purity: Salafism as a transnational movement*. ISIM review 22 January 2008.

De Koning, Martijn (2008) *'You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah': Muslim youth and Salafi politics in Dutch society* Paper prepared for the international workshop 9–10 October 2008

Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland.

107 De Graaf, Beatrice (2010) *The Nexus Between Salafism and Jihadism in the Netherlands*. CTC Sentinel, Vol. 3 No. 3.

old and in most cases, socially and economically disadvantaged. Although considerable diversity was detected in their educational background, many of the young people were marked by unemployment or a job requiring little educational background. Almost 50% of the people leaving were first or second-generation immigrants of Moroccan origin while the remainder of this heterogeneous group comprised young people of Dutch, Turkish, Syrian, Somali and Algerian origin. The phenomenon was also clearly concentrated in the peer group networks of certain socially marginal metropolitan areas. In many cases, those departing were related to one another. In the Netherlands, this movement was the most substantial in the areas of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Hague and Utrecht. Almost 20% of the people leaving had been subjected to a criminal investigation or been convicted of a crime before their departure.<sup>108</sup>

## **The operational environment of far-right extremism**

According to the AIVD, the movement of the extreme right is increasing but local groups and lone individuals still rarely make violence a part of their activities. For example, acts of violence motivated by racism are limited to a few dozen per year. In the case of the Netherlands, the operational environment builds on fragmented small groups that are at least loosely tied to movements within the international operational environment, such as Blood & Honour, Combat 18 and Pegida. Furthermore, this range of actors includes individuals communicating online, who are not associated with any organisation. As a whole, the active operational environment of people committing violence is very small. According to police estimates, it comprises only about 150–250 people and their number has not changed substantially in recent years. However, a relatively high number of racist offences are committed in the Netherlands against the Jewish population and asylum seekers. Especially in 2016, the anti-immigration, anti-Islamisation and anti-immigration camps organised numerous demonstrations, some of which turned violent.<sup>109</sup>

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108 Bakker, Edwin & De Bont, Roel (2016) Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 5, No. 27.

109 The Netherlands: Extremism and Terrorism.  
<https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/netherlands>

The Netherlands has two highly prominent, democratically elected extreme right parties, the Party for Freedom (PVV) and the Forum for Democracy (FVD). These have succeeded in normalising a negative and often dehumanising way of speaking against ethnic and religious minorities. Political rhetoric that criticises immigration and Islam appeared in mainstream politics in 2002 when Pim Fortuyn, a member of the Liveable Netherlands party, raised these themes to the heart of his message. Largely due to the activity of Fortuyn, Muslim integration became the subject of extensive debate in the Netherlands. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections in May of 2002, an environmental activist murdered Fortuyn. Geert Wilders, the founder and chairman of the PVV, further exacerbated Fortuyn's rhetoric. Since 2010, Wilders has repeatedly compared the Quran with Hitler's "Mein Kampf" and has called for a ban on the Quran. For instance, in connection with his parliamentary election campaign in 2017, he declared that Islamisation is the country's biggest problem because it poses "an existential threat" to Dutch identity and freedom.<sup>110</sup>

The FVD party, in turn, is profiled as a "more sophisticated" alternative to the PVV rhetoric. Party leader Thierry Baudet focuses his criticism mostly on political Islam. The message successfully reached the electorate and with its support of 14.1%, the party became the winner of the local elections in 2019.<sup>111</sup> In the Netherlands, it is very difficult to assess which way far-right extremism is heading. According to the AIVD, the extreme right threat is small compared with that in neighbouring Germany but the mainstreaming of hate speech and anti-Islamic rhetoric may create a breeding ground for violent attacks by radicalised lone actors.<sup>112</sup>

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110 Damhuis, Koen (2019) "The biggest problem in the Netherlands": Understanding the Party for Freedom's politicization of Islam. Brookings report, 24 July 2019.

111 Ibid.

112 The Netherlands: Extremism and Terrorism.  
<https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/netherlands>

# EXTREMISM AS A COUNTERCULTURAL STYLE

Extremist operational environments create anti-mainstream forms of culture. Those who engage in this movement build a sense of solidarity by turning against the mainstream set of values and offering an ideological and stylistic alternative. A typical trait of extremist countercultures is their militaristic and “street-credible” style, tinged by an apocalyptic worldview,<sup>113</sup> which has adopted concepts and elements of the Western cultures of the streets, crime, and music. By adopting the facilities of stylistic and bodily communication peculiar to the particular form of extremism, the participants can patch up their feelings of deprivation, insignificance and weakness and gain access to the company of like-minded people.<sup>114</sup> When analysing the phenotypes of Islamist extremism, Mark Sageman (2008) conceptualised the militant, masculine Muslim style by the term jihadi cool. According to Sageman, the essential thing for this extremist subculture is to unite religious belief with a desire to look fierce and cool-headed, thus providing a role model for youth gang members, who idealise weapons and are often petty criminals.<sup>115</sup> For example, the essential stylistic elements of ISIS include heavy assault rifles, the military gear that has been etched in the global media imagery since the Afghan battlefields of the 1980s, as well as a musical style adopted from the global Islamist scene, namely nasheed choral singing.<sup>116</sup> The publications and websites of the organisation include horses and lions bursting with

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113 Hamm, Mark (2004) *Apocalyptic Violence: The Seduction of Terrorist Subcultures*. *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol. 8, No. 3.

114 Myhre Sunde, Hans (2017) *Stories, Style & Radicalization: A Cultural and Narrative Criminological Study of Jihadi Propaganda Magazines*. Master's Thesis in Criminology Faculty of Law Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo.

115 Sageman, Marc (2008) *Leaderless Jihad: terror networks in the twenty-first century*. University of Pennsylvania.

116 Dantschke, Claudia (2013) *Pop-Jihad: History and Structure of Salafism and Jihadism in Germany*. ISRM - Institute for the Study of Radical Movements Working Paper Series 02/2013.

power, athletes with Muslim backgrounds who have earned a reputation in the martial arts, and an attitude adopted from gangsta rap: steeped in violence, respecting nothing.<sup>117</sup>

The countercultural styles and fashions of the extreme right appeared in the Western urban landscape as far back as the 1960s and 1970s. Skinheads and neo-Nazis created a stylistic spectrum of their own, which included things like lace-up boots, short pilot jackets, the crown of the head shaved bald—and many local variations of these. The tattoos boasted symbols referring to Nazi Germany, white supremacy or alternatively, the “ancient” Germanic or Scandinavian traditions. Punk rock and later death metal music created peculiar extremist sub-genres with emphasis on hatred toward Jews, homosexuals, communists, anarchists, anti-racists and non-white people.<sup>118</sup> In the age of the Internet, the extreme right-wing cultural style has not only become diversified but also less obvious. Symbols overtly referring to Nazism have been criminalised throughout Europe or they have begun to raise strong public disapproval. In recent years, these symbols have become increasingly covert in their meanings. They are intended to convey messages to various inner circles and to attract the attention of those interested in extremist ideas. It is also typical of our time that extremist ideas and symbols are hidden in humour, animations and, for example, the memes and game cultures spreading over the Internet.<sup>119</sup> Under the guise of satire and humour, efforts are being made to shape and mainstream extremist ideas.

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117 Hemmingsen, Ann-Sophie (2015) Viewing jihadism as a counterculture: potential and limitations. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, Vol. 7, No. 1.

118 Hodge, Edwin. Digital extremism: Right wing extremism and recruitment in online spaces. EUCA Webinar: The Surge of Right-wing Extremism in Europe and Canada: How far-reaching is the threat? (11 June 2019) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVvGGoyRWbc>

119 Glitsos, Laura (2020) The Pepe the Frog Meme: an examination of social, political, and cultural implications through the tradition of the Darwinian Absurd. *Journal for Cultural Research*, Vol. 23, No. 4.

## Preventive work

In the Netherlands, the prevention of extremism was triggered by the situation described above at the initiative of the authorities of the largest cities. A national action plan was completed in 2007, setting as its objectives the prevention of the withdrawal, polarisation and radicalisation of population groups, support to group disengagement and deradicalisation, and the strengthening of law enforcement. The strategy was based on the theory of supply and demand. Accordingly, radical ideology resonates with young people who are seeking their identity and affected by integration issues. In turn, imams who have adopted extremist attitudes are offering answers to the question of how to live as a Muslim in the surrounding society. The preventive action involves the following state administrative bodies: the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) the Ministry of Justice and Security (WWI), the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW). At the same time, countering polarisation and radicalisation is considered primarily a matter for the local government and municipalities. The role of the state administration, in turn, is to support the activities of the municipalities. Unlike the British strategy, the Dutch national strategy for prevention has raised little public criticism or debate.<sup>120</sup>

In the Dutch model, preventive work at the local level falls under the responsibility of an administrative structure called the joint procedure, formed by the mayor, the police and the prosecutors. It is in charge of coordinating the measures among the authorities operating in the various sectors. Within this structure, the various authorities share information on the progress related to extremism and radicalisation and the people causing concern. Based on this information, the authorities conduct a threat assessment of these people and, if necessary, direct them to the appropriate services and/or other support. A person under a criminal investigation, too, will have the opportunity to access other forms of support and services. The joint procedure decides on further measures by consensus. The implementation of the joint procedure decisions is divided into two multi-professional structures. The first one is a team of 20 entities operating in connection with the police departments and comprising the service-providing authorities (family, child welfare, social work, etc.) and representatives of the police force and the prosecutor's office.

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120 Portaal Preventie Gewelddadige Radicalisering en Polarisering.  
<https://preventie-radicalisering-polarisering.vlaanderen.be/vormingsinitiatieven>



Each entity provides the team with its expertise, services and background information on the cases at hand. The majority of cases come to be handled by the team by the direction of crime prevention or the joint procedure but in principle, any cooperating entity may initiate the handling of a case to the team. The team creates a support plan for the person causing concern, who will then be referred to appropriate support that falls under the responsibility of the authorities and, if necessary, organisations as well. In the case of each person, the team also decides which municipal public service or organisation will coordinate the implementation of the measures and report the results to the team. The coordination of cases that involve countering a crime in the making is under the responsibility of the police.<sup>121</sup>

In the Netherlands, the municipality and the nationwide support team for extremism (Landelijke Steunpunt Extremisme (LSE)) offer comprehensive practical family assistance with problems presented by extremism and radicalisation, ranging from psychosocial support to unpacking practical problems, for example, in a situation where a family member returns from the Syrian conflict zone.<sup>122</sup>

A threat assessment of the people returning from conflict zones is made as soon as possible. Based on this, the returnees are divided into three categories of cases as follows: direct security threats, risks (for example, in terms of their recruitment potential), and potential threats (for example, due to the international connections they have built). The Dutch authorities also provide returnees with tailored assistance<sup>123</sup> which may include healthcare procedures and various forms of rehabilitative support.

## **Family support activities**

The Netherlands has a wide range of authorities engaged in preventive work, as well as NGOs and other organisations consisting of cooperation networks. Their field of action extends from the local and regional levels up to the national and international levels.

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121 Perukangas, Milla, Mankkinen, Tarja (2019) Havaintoja palveluun ohjauksen rajapinnasta ja suosituksia toiminnan kehittämiseksi. Publications of the Ministry of the Interior 2019:17. Pg. 39–41.

122 Landelijk Steunpunt Extremisme (LSE). <https://www.landelijksteunpuntextremisme.nl/>

123 Ibid.

The Dutch community police play a key role in preventing radicalisation. They act as a bridge, connecting the family, the police, the municipality, and other key organisations. The community police handle all forms of radicalisation involving violence or other activity that threatens the stability of society. Indeed, the community police are the most usual ones to be approached when concerns arise about the radicalisation of a family member.

According to a prevention work specialist who has worked on numerous EU-funded projects, the work with families in the Netherlands has almost exclusively been aimed at the Islamist operating environment. The funded programmes, like those in many of the other countries covered by this report, focus on the challenges posed by mobility to the Syrian conflict zone and, in particular, the process of returning from there. In the interview, this specialist held that the building of confidential relations with the Moroccan communities in the Netherlands was of primary importance for launching support activities: “In principle, we always work with the Moroccan organisations of the Netherlands. “Based on our long experience, we know the organisations that have good connections with the community. Together with them, we organise focus group interviews and always ask them for feedback on the material and practices we produce to support the families.”

At the same time, however, this specialist noted that the accessibility of the communities varies depending on the target group. For example, a series of events was successfully organised together with Moroccan and Turkish-born fathers to discuss the relations between fathers and sons and the possibilities of fathers to respond to the challenges posed by radicalisation. On the other hand, efforts to integrate the imams operating in the Netherlands into the family work met with great difficulties.

“The gap is too wide,” the interviewee said. “We tried to contact them by letter but got little response. So, we decided to use the people we know, who had connections in the Muslim communities, but despite this, we succeeded in reaching only two imams whom we already knew based on previous projects.”

The interviewee also noted that the problem with integrating imams into the family support measures lies in their representativeness as well: “When we look for cooperation partners, there invariably will be people who declare that they represent the community but then the wider community may have a completely different view of the matter. So, there are many challenges ahead in this respect. We must always ask who represents the needs of the community and is a useful person for them.”

The previously mentioned LSE, set up in 2015, is an organisation that has sought to remove some of the barriers to the accessibility of individuals, families and communities affected by radicalisation. It specialises in helping children and young people, who are vulnerable to radicalisation, and their families. The objectives of the family support work offered by the LSE are to train other family members to recognise the signs of radicalisation and to increase their understanding of the recruitment process. The LSE provides parents with knowledge and skills to identify whether a child’s concerning behaviour is about a normal state of development or whether it constitutes the early stage of the radicalisation process. Often parents also have difficulties in identifying the traits that distinguish extremism from social activism. In the LSE view, only extremist activities are characterised by deliberate, ideology-based violations of the law, which may involve physical violence, verbal threats and destruction of property alike.

The LSE instructs parents to pay attention to any changes in the young person’s networks of friends, the emergence of new important people in their lives, media behaviour, withdrawal, the adoption of fanatical and polarised ideas, and the construction of objects of hatred. Parents should also note that major changes in the life of a child can trigger some courses of events that can expose them to extremism. Parents are advised to stay very flexible and empathetic toward the child. Contact with the child must be maintained and their thoughts and actions should not be rejected. According to the LSE, it is simply best not to discuss ideology because such a situation puts the child on the defensive or furthers their encapsulation. If the child maintains close relationships with someone, who conveys or supports extremist ideas, the parents must contact a professional for assistance. In this case, an LSE contact person will provide advice that is suitable for the case. In severe cases, the family will be referred to a designated support person providing long-term assistance. Where appropriate, the family members will be shown to some more specified professional assistance.

In the case of people returning to their home country from the conflict zone, the LSE makes the scope of its activities clear to the family members. It does not provide direct repatriation assistance or participate in any criminal proceedings that may lie ahead. On the other hand, the LSE officials do provide advice on the proceedings and practices of litigation and offer tailored assistance especially to families who are in this situation.

In cases where one or more family members are taken into custody or incarcerated for offences linked to extremism, the LSE offers the families special support. In these cases, too, the family will get a permanent contact person with whom they can seek solutions to the challenges posed by the situation. The contact person clearly brings out the scope of LSE activities. If the parents so desire, they will be referred to peer groups of people sharing similar experiences. Families are also offered opportunities to visit the prison assigned to those convicted of terrorism.<sup>124</sup>

The Dutch Association of Mental Health and Addiction Care (GGZ), in turn, offers assistance in situations where mental health issues are linked to the radicalisation process. Most usually, people are referred to this service through a general medical practitioner. The GGZ also offers help and self-care instructions to the family members of the radicalised person.<sup>125</sup>

To mention another one of the services offered to support families, the Family Information Portal, developed under the EU-funded Pericles programme, brings together key information about extremism and the radicalisation process of our time, as well as the challenges these pose to family relations. The portal also provides an extensive discussion on some of the tools for addressing questions related to radicalisation within the family and offers key information on the service supply chains.<sup>126</sup>

According to an interviewee who took part in the construction of the portal, the need for the project became apparent through interview material that had been collected from the families of those who had returned to Denmark, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands from the Syrian conflict zone. Almost all of the 20 subjects of the study had detected changes in the child's clothing, social relations and religious observation but had not

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124 Ibid.

125 The website of the organisation is available at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/geestelijke-gezondheidszorg>.

126 The portal is available at [https://platform-pericles.eu/familyportal/families\\_for\\_families.php](https://platform-pericles.eu/familyportal/families_for_families.php).

realised that the young person was becoming radicalised. In most cases, the parents had been informed about the young person's situation when that person had called them from the Turkish-Syrian border zone just before entering the conflict zone.

According to this interviewee, "The news was often very dramatic. That was when we realised that we need to raise awareness and help the parents to understand what is at hand and where they can get support and help."

Like many of the countries covered by this report, the portal seeks to express the personal experiences of families and the methods these families use to make it through an extremely hard situation in life. However, it has proved to be a burden to family members to go public with their experiences.

According to the interviewee who participated in the development of the portal, "It is true that the majority of parents do not want to come forward. The issue at stake is taboo and addressing it can easily bring some guilt. On the other hand, one father with a Moroccan background has been very visible about his experiences in our national media. Soon, he became the object of highly aggressive journalistic attention. People believed he had played a role in the radicalisation of his child. When I spoke with him the last time, he was very depressed. It is a very heavy burden. This father wished to speak on behalf of the families, but the media may completely misinterpret the situation. You have to be extremely convinced of your stance and arguments to go public."

## Norway

### Background

The efficient and generous social welfare system of Norwegian society and the Norwegian foreign policy supporting peace work are factors that have contributed to keeping the extremist operational environment limited in Norway. The country has also kept to a side role in the world's conflict zones, where Western military coalitions are involved in the name of the war against terrorism. Thus, the ideological attitudes so typical of Islamism about Muslims as the victims of Western geopolitics have not taken root within the Muslim population of Norway. The tensions caused by the polarisation of

the population groups, which have led to movement especially in Germany and the United Kingdom, have not raised any significant reactions in Norwegian society. For these reasons, it has been possible for the Norwegian authorities to allocate resources to countering terrorism rather than following the processes linked to Islamism.<sup>127</sup>

## **The operational environment of Islamist extremism**

For more than a decade, the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) has regarded extreme Islamist movements as the most serious threat to society. The threat was estimated to have increased after 2012 when young Norwegian men began to travel to the Syrian conflict zone. About 50 people had travelled there from Norway between 2012 and June of 2014, but the phenomenon began to show clear signs of fading in 2016.<sup>128</sup>

By January 2020, the number of Norwegians who had engaged with extremist organisations that were operating in Syria was estimated to be about 140. A significant proportion of those who travelled to Syria has a background of problems with integrating into society, both in terms of education and the labour market situation. A little more than two out of every three were born outside Norway but came there as a child, a teenager or a young adult. Ethnically speaking, about 20% of these people are Norwegians who converted to Islam. Their personal histories involve a mixed bag of experiences of marginalisation.<sup>129</sup>

Especially in the Oslo region, many of those who engaged in the movements have some criminal background. As elsewhere in the EU countries, those who travelled to the conflict zones knew one another very often and many were linked to radical organisations: in the case of Norway, Profetens Ummah in particular. Despite the threat estimates by the police, public support for radical Islamist interpretations in proportion to the total Norwegian population was very low throughout the busiest movement of foreign fighters.<sup>130</sup>

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127 Vidino, Lorenzo, Brandon, James (2012) *Countering Radicalization in Europe*. ICSR King's College London. Pg. 59-68.

128 Carlsson, Yngve (2017) *Violent Extremism: Prevention of a wicked problem – the role of local authorities*. The Norwegian Association of local and Regional Authorities (KS). <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/publications/c-rex-working-paper-series/Violent-extremism-working-paper-2-2017.pdf>

129 Ibid.

130 Pedersen, Willy, Vestel, Viggo, Bakke Anders (2018) *At Risk for Radicalization and Jihadism? A population-based study of Norwegian adolescent*. *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 53, No. 1.

## The operational environment of the extreme right

Having been the most active in the early 1990s, the movement of the organised extreme right in Norway is a phenomenon that has largely waned today and there have been no significant extremist attacks in Norway apart from the terrorist attacks carried out by Anders Breivik in July of 2011. The motives of Breivik's activities were essentially linked to the themes of immigration, multiculturalism and anti-Islam, which he expressed in his 1,500-page manifesto.<sup>131</sup> In recent years, especially the terrorist attacks carried out by Islamist extremists in Central Europe and the sudden increase in the number of asylum seekers, as well as the migration crises in the Mediterranean region began to be followed by signs of growing polarisation in the attitude climate. At the beginning of January 2015, a support march was organised in Norway for PEGIDA, a German anti-immigrant movement. Other anti-Islam agencies, such as the Norwegian Defence League and Stop Islamizing Norway, were also showing signs of increasing support to the global Islamophobic rhetoric and getting organised.<sup>132</sup> By 2019, negative attitudes toward the Muslim population were widely present in Norwegian society. According to a wide survey published in 2020, 34% of the respondents had considerable prejudices against Muslims and 28% expressed hostile attitudes toward them.<sup>133</sup>

Currently, the extreme groups of Norway are considerably more heterogeneous than before in terms of their ideological basis and social profile. Although the psychological and social factors that drive people into the radicalisation process are quite similar to those in previous times, the extremist cultures and operational environments have expanded, becoming globalised and diversified. The development of the extremist operational environment depends on general social polarisation around the themes linked to immigration, multiculturalism and Islam.

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131 Richards, Barry (2014) What Drove Anders Breivik. Contexts, American Sociological Association. Vol. 13, No. 4.

132 Bayrakli, Enes, Hafez, Farid (2015) European Islamophobia Report: Norway. [https://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/reports/2015/en/EIR\\_2015\\_NORWAY.pdf](https://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/reports/2015/en/EIR_2015_NORWAY.pdf)

133 Hoffmann, Christhard, Moe, Vibeke (eds.). 2020. The Shifting Boundaries of Prejudice: Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Contemporary Norway. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

# THE INTERNET AND EXTREMISM

Over the past ten years, the debate about the relationship between the extremist operational environment and the Internet has abounded in comments.<sup>134</sup> The Internet has even been seen as the main artery for the recruitment activities of extremist organisations.<sup>135</sup> The reasons for this are manifold. The information network provides a cheap and effective way of communicating ideas throughout the world, networking globally, and organising meetings or making other arrangements that further the integration of a steady stream of new individuals into the movements or feeding their interest in extremism. The Internet allows anonymous communication which, in turn, motivates individuals to communicate their ideas online without the constraints of the social control associated with living face-to-face. The discussion spaces of like-minded people easily produce global echo chambers that strengthen ideological attitudes. Anonymity also allows the dissemination of extremist ideological content, such as manuals, manifestos and consumer culture products, without fear of criminal sanctions. All this evokes images of a global system-challenging mass power and “critical mass” as a consequence. In addition to all this, the Internet is now an important channel for financing extremism. The consumer products, clothing and entertainment, which are part of the extremist sub-culture, change owners online and the profit is channelled to finance the activities.<sup>136</sup>

Thus, the Internet has accelerated the globalisation of extremist ideas. At the same time, extremism succeeded in penetrating various ecosystems of the online world, especially hacker and gaming cultures, as well as many social media applications. Numerous governments of the EU countries are calling for faster action from social media platforms to eliminate illegal content but it would be erroneous to assume that the behaviour of these

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134 See e.g., Aly, Anne, Macdonald, Stuart, Jarvis, Lee, Chen, Thomas (ed.) (2016). *Violent Extremism Online: New Perspectives on Terrorism and the Internet*. Routledge.

Conway, Maura (2017) *Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 40, No.1.

135 Covid: Lockdown 'exploited by extremists to recruit' BBC News, 11 November 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-54874300>

136 Koehler, Daniel (2014) *The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet*. *Journal for Deradicalization* No. 1 Winter 2014/15.



companies will change the behaviour of the extremist content producers in a more favourable direction.<sup>137</sup> Nowadays, the largest companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, are making visible efforts to counter online hatred but most of the terrorist and violent extremist activity has moved to new messaging applications. In particular, encrypted media platforms like Telegram, launched in 2013, have become popular with violent extremist movements in recent years.<sup>138</sup> Extremism is found to have penetrated the digital gaming cultures. There is even talk about the gamification of extremism, which refers, on the one hand, to the fact that extremism in itself has traits adopted from the cultures of violent games but, on the other hand, the issue is about the conveyance of extremist ideas through online game environments. In particular, the violent acts committed in Pittsburgh in 2018, Christchurch in 2019, El Paso in 2019, and Halle in 2019 had numerous traits that refer to game cultures.<sup>139</sup>

## Preventive work

The work to prevent extremism was launched in Norway as early as the 1980s in response to a sudden activation of extreme right-wing activity. Even at this early stage, the work was based on cooperation between the municipalities, the local police, the NGOs, parental groups and local businesses.<sup>140</sup> The approach, which proved to be highly successful, relied on preventive rather than repressive measures.<sup>141</sup> The focus of prevention gradually shifted toward Islamist extremism and the activities made use of structures and strategies that had built on the experiences gained from measures against the extreme right. The approach emphasised soft methods, such as those of the “Exit” initiative, the prevention work supported the networking of

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137 EU piles pressure on internet giants to remove extremist content. Reuters 1 March 2018  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-internet-content-idUSKCNIGD4WW>

138 Molla, Rani. Why right-wing extremists’ favorite new platform is so dangerous. VOX Jan 20. 2021  
<https://www.vox.com/recode/22238755/telegram-messaging-social-media-extremists>

139 Schlegel, Linda (2021) The Role of Gamification in Radicalization Processes. the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) Working Paper: 1/21.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348621313\\_Working\\_Paper\\_The\\_Role\\_of\\_Gamification\\_in\\_Radicalization\\_Processes#fullTextFileContent](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348621313_Working_Paper_The_Role_of_Gamification_in_Radicalization_Processes#fullTextFileContent)

140 Fangen, Katrine, Carlsson, Yngve (2013): Right-Wing Extremism in Norway: Prevention and Intervention. In Melzer R. and Serafin S. (eds). Right-Wing Extremism in Europe. Berling: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

141 Vidino, Lorenzo, Brandon, James (2012) Countering Radicalization in Europe. ICSR King’s College London.

the parents of radicalised young people and built preventive dialogue and guidance methods.<sup>142</sup>

Nowadays, practical preventive work is implemented through a multi-agency structure, where the ministries, Government agencies and regional and local actors (e.g., social care, health care, child and youth work) work in close cooperation with the support of civil society organisations and religious communities. Unlike the support measures in countries like Germany, the ones in Norway have been interwoven into the public services of municipal youth, social and family work.

The Norwegian police authorities play a key role in prevention work since all the police districts have a contact person with the duty of intervening in cases of radicalisation and violent extremist movements.<sup>143</sup> The preventive work emphasises early intervention in the radicalisation process. Local and regional work, in turn, is based on horizontal multi-agency coordination where the police, the municipalities, specialists, and the NGO sector hold the key roles. At the heart of the measures, there are so-called “empowerment discussions”, with the local police force shouldering the responsibility for them. In the discussions, a police representative will bring up themes regarding the customer’s quality of life and as necessary, that of their family and seek to create for the customer a personal forecast assuming that the customer continues activities in an extremist operational environment. The Norwegian model emphasises horizontal action by teachers, the police, community workers, youth organisations and religious leaders. It is worth noting that a very limited number of those who have gone through the empowerment discussions have a Muslim background.<sup>144</sup>

Municipal authorities receive updated information on the local conditions and thus have a good chance of identifying issues of concern. The local authorities, the local police and the PST engage in close cooperation in the field of prevention. The municipality is in charge of the general prevention of extremism but it can also act as a partner of the local police and the PST in cases of greater severity. The PST is in charge of cases that cause a serious risk of extreme violence. Moreover, the support measures for families hurt by extremism in one way or another are also channelled through the municipal services.

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142 Bjørge, Tore, Gjelsvik, Ingvild Magnæs (2015) Norwegian research on the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism: A status of knowledge. PHS Forskning 2015: 2.

143 Efforts to Prevent Extremism in the Nordic Countries: Mapping. Ramboll 2017.

144 Ibid.

Special family support offices have been set up in many municipalities to provide free assistance on questions related to the radicalisation of a family member. These offices can be turned to without a referral from another authority and they have a wide range of professionals, such as psychologists, sociologists, and family therapists.

Largely due to the municipal sector's service supply, organisations do not assume the key responsibility for activities intended for the family level. In 2017–2020, the Competence Center for Crime Prevention, which funds the project activities of the prevention sector, provided support to more than 200 local and municipal prevention projects in various parts of the country annually. None of them focused on family support measures in particular.

According to a specialist in preventive work, who spent early adulthood in the neo-Nazi movement, in and out of prison, problems related to family dynamics are characteristic of Norwegian neo-Nazis. This interviewee emphasised that many movement leaders deliberately had built themselves into warm, empathetic father figures. The movement seeks to give young people acceptance, security and purpose—everything that these young people failed to get from their families. According to the interviewee, these movements are highly skilled in tracking young people from broken homes and can aim their recruitment activities in a situation where the young person is particularly vulnerable. The same interviewee claimed to have personally recruited a young person while that person was a bed patient in the oncology ward of a hospital.

Describing the role of the recruiters, the interviewee said, “The most important thing these recruiters can offer is understanding. If they are the only people who offer a listening ear and understanding, joining an extremist movement is a very logical step. Being understood and accepted are fundamental human needs, which is something the recruiters for extremist movements have understood very well.”

In the opinion of this interviewee, separation from these movements is possible through the same methods as those used by the recruiters: “A random encounter with a person expressing compassion rather than hate can be decisive. I was met with love and compassion as I separated from the movement and this helped me to move forward. I well remember one prison guard who always acted with respect but challenged my thinking at the same time. He once asked what good I had gained from neo-Nazism. I

thought about my situation. My grandfather's transport company had gone bankrupt because of my bad reputation, my sister was being bullied at school and my parents were socially isolated. In the end, the thing that helped me to separate was the fact that my parents were exceptional in those circles: they never left me. While I was in and out of prison, they visited me constantly regardless of where in Norway I was being held."

Indeed, this interviewee emphasised that the empathy and compassion offered by the family and through positive human relations constitute the most effective "counter-narrative" and it is more powerful than the extremist message: "If no one listens to your frustrations, extremists will certainly offer an attractive alternative. We all need to do better than the extremists in this respect. Every teacher and youth worker has a strong sense of which young people in our community are on the criminal path. When I work in schools, teachers often say that they had an early sense of what path some young person was on when they drifted the wrong way. When I asked one teacher why they did not intervene, they replied that it was not their responsibility. But we are all responsible: I am, you are, the neighbours, the teachers, the parents and relatives all are! We are all part of the community and we cannot assume that the intelligence officer or the experts or organisations would be all-powerful. The responsibility for prevention lies with the community."

## Finland

### Background

The Finnish Security and Intelligence Service (Supo) released a statement in October 2020, saying that within the Finnish counter-terrorism setting, they were following about 400 people concerned. These included people who provide training or other support to extremist organisations, as well as those who have been trained by them. The number of people followed has not changed significantly in recent years, reflecting a limited extremist operational environment compared with that of the other countries covered by this report. In Supo's view, Islamist extremism presently poses the most significant threat although the threat from the extreme right has seen growth in recent years.

Compared with the Muslim population in many other EU countries, the one in Finland is small although its proportion of the total population is estimated to grow rapidly from the current level of approximately 2.7% to 11.4% by 2050, assuming that immigration stays at a moderate level.<sup>145</sup> Unlike all the other countries concerned, Finland has never pursued a significant migrant labour recruitment policy. A Muslim population of higher visibility began to build in Finland in the early 1990s, largely after the arrival of asylum seekers and quota refugees from the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan and Somalia. At present, almost 50% of the Muslims of immigrant origin either came from these regions personally or are descendants of those who came. The other considerable Muslim populations comprise refugees and asylum seekers from the regions of the former Yugoslavia and Albania, as well as Turkish and North African migrants.<sup>146</sup>

The operational environment of Islamist-motivated extremism in Finland differs from that of the other countries covered by this report not only in its limited size but also in terms of its history. The networks of radical movements have built visibly in Finland only in the past ten years or so, especially with the mobility of the foreign fighters of Syria and Iraq.<sup>147</sup> The view of the authorities throughout the first decade of the 21st century was that this phenomenon is very marginal in Finland. In their estimation, the actors—few in number and mainly with immigrant backgrounds—had turned their activities exclusively to the operational environment of their countries of origin. In addition to the mobility of foreign fighters, this activity has been mainly limited to non-violent support, such as recruitment and financial assistance to the organisations of the fields of conflict.

## **The operational environment of Islamist extremism**

Unlike the supporters of Islamist extremism in the other countries covered by this report, those in Finland do not engage in public activity, such as street events, demonstrations or the distribution of leaflets and other information. The operational environment also totally lacks charismatic “father figures”,

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145 PEW (2017) Europe’s Growing Muslim Population. <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/eu-ropes-growing-muslim-population/>

146 Martikainen, Tuomas (2020) Finnish Muslims’ Journey from an Invisible Minority to Public Partnerships. *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, Vol. 56, No. 1.

147 Juntunen, Marko, Creutz-Sundblom, Karin, Saarinen, Juha (2016) Suomesta Syyrian ja Irakin konfliktikentälle suuntautuva liikkuvuus. Government’s analysis, assessment and research publication series 43/2016. Prime Minister’s Office.

such as Mullah Krekar (Norway), Anjem Choudary (United Kingdom) and Pierre Vogel (Germany), who attract wide media attention with their message. At the same time, however, it must be noted that some content that had been produced mainly by the Anglo-American radical imams was available on Finnish Islamic online forums, online publications and personal blogs already in 2005–2010. This shows that these ideas resonated with people in Finland as well.<sup>148</sup>

People engage with the operational environment largely under the guidance of social contacts within their immediate circle. Most typically, this is about the inspiration offered to others within the circle of acquaintances or relatives by a young person who is tied to extremist ideas.<sup>149</sup>

By Supo's estimates, the threat posed by Islamist extremism increased in Finland in recent years as a consequence of three factors, namely the mobility of foreign fighters, domestic radicalisation, and terrorist acts committed elsewhere. The actors have kept in closer touch with their cross-border contacts and extremists in the conflict zones and elsewhere in Europe. At the same time, an ever-increasing number of people have personal experience in extremist activity in the conflict zone. The authorities estimate that the mobility to the Syrian-Iraqi conflict zone in 2012–2016 involved a total of about 80 people, of whom about 30 were children at the time of departure. At the time of this writing, more than 20 people have returned from the conflict zone and about 30 are estimated to have died. The people who travelled to the zone include foreign fighters and their spouses and children, those with combat training and experience and those who are tied to terrorist activity and ideology in one way or another. Some are likely to be ideologically radicalised but disappointed by the activities of the extremist organisations. Others, in turn, have also been deradicalised in their ideas and dissociated themselves from the operational environment.<sup>150</sup>

According to Supo, people returning from the conflict zone have the potential of increasing the threat of terrorism in Finland by spreading their extremist ideological views and building their networks. The common Finnish admin-

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148 Juntunen, Marko (2008) Saudi-Arabian islamilainen lähetystyö tuottaa tulosta. *Ulkopolitiikka* 3, 2008. Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki.

149 Juntunen, Marko, Creutz-Sundblom, Karin, Saarinen, Juha (2016) Suomesta Syyrian ja Irakin konfliktikentälle suuntautuva liikkuvuus. Government's analysis, assessment and research publication series 43/2016. Prime Minister's Office.

150 Väkivaltaisen ekstremismin tilannekatsaus 1/2018. Ministry of the Interior, Helsinki 2018. Väkivaltaisen ekstremismin tilannekatsaus 2020. Ministry of the Interior, Helsinki 2020.

istrative practice is to individually assess the potential security threat of the returnees and if some returnee is suspected of having committed crimes, they are transferred to the National Bureau of Investigation for a criminal investigation. At the time of this writing, none of the people who have taken part in the mobility to the Syrian conflict zone and returned to Finland has been prosecuted for their activities there.<sup>151</sup>

## **The operational environment of the extreme right**

The development of the operational environment of the extreme right in Finland is similar in many ways to that in Norway. Few in number, the group of actors linked to the extreme right and neo-Nazis began to build images of enmity in Finland in the 1980s. These were images against immigrants and refugees instead of the traditional enemy, namely communists. The sudden change in the political situation with refugees at the turn of the 1990s triggered spontaneous acts of violence, such as petrol bombs against a foreign population that was few. At the time, critical voices against immigration also arose from the mainstream parties. Toward the end of the decade, a largely unorganised skinhead culture, unarticulated in its ideological basis, appeared in the urban landscape of many places.<sup>152</sup>

The economic recession of the early 1990s brought along neo-fascist and skinhead movement that was more visible. However, this waned at the turn of the millennium. Like elsewhere in the countries covered by this report, anti-Islamic and anti-immigration attitudes became the distinctive traits of these movements at the turn of the 2010s. In the view of the police, the operational environment of the extreme right is presently composed of fragmented, non-hierarchical groups, none of which can be said to represent some umbrella organisation. Like in the other countries concerned, negative attitudes toward the immigrant population began to intensify as a consequence of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the dispute over a caricature of the Prophet Mohammed in 2006, and the terrorist attacks that happened in London in 2005 and subsequently in various parts of Europe. Several blog writers spreading Islamophobic and “counter-jihadist” ideas began to gain

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151 See Radikaali-islamistinen terrorismi on yhä merkittävä uhka Euroopassa <https://supo.fi/radikaali-islamistinen-terrorismi>

152 See Kotonen, Tommi (2018) Poliitiikan juoksuhaudat: Äärioikeistoliiikkeet Suomessa kylmän sodan aikana. Atena Kustannus Oy.  
Jukka Lindfors. Rasismi roihahti liekkiin Tampereen polttopulloiskuissa 1989. Yle, Elävä arkisto 6 October 2015.

growing resonance in cyberspace.<sup>153</sup> Based on a survey conducted in 2008, almost 50% of the Finns had negative attitudes toward Muslims and Islam.<sup>154</sup> Over the next ten years, these attitudes became even more pronounced. According to the Pew Research Center, 62% of the Finns believed in 2018 that Islam is not compatible with the national culture and values.<sup>155</sup> Based on a survey of 15 Western European countries, the most negative attitudes in this respect were found in Finland.

The most prominent movement of the anti-Islamic extreme right is centred in Helsinki, Tampere, Turku and Jyväskylä. According to the police, several movements that became active before and after the 2015 refugee crisis are waning but will reactivate depending on the situation. These movements include, among others, Finnish People First, Reformi-Studio, Soldiers of Odin and the Finnish Defence League. According to the police, the active range of actors comprises members of the Nordic Resistance Movement which was disbanded by order of the authorities, who have transferred to other networks. The movements spread propaganda via leaflets and the information network, organise trekking and camping events, practise martial arts, and participate in demonstrations and street marches.<sup>156</sup>

One can only guess how the strategies for action and the international ties will evolve in the future. Whether the movements will focus on political activism, the encouragement of hate speech and online shaming, visible campaigning at the street level or direct violence is largely an open question.

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153 See Juntunen Marko (2020) Matkalla islamilaisessa Suomessa. Vastapaino.

154 Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD) Bulletin Issue 33 (2/2011) 9 December 2011.  
<https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/lehti/en/33/uskontoasenteet.html>

155 PEW (2018) Religion and Public life.  
<https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/nationalism-immigration-and-minorities>

156 Rantala, Talneli. Äärioikeisto Pyöreä pöytä webinaari 25 October 2020, Helsinki.



# RECENT PROCESSES OF EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Due to the communication enabled by the Internet, the movements of extremists are more networked today than ever before. A typical phenomenon of our time is that the targets and target audiences of extremist violence are globalising as well. The recent acts of violence in Christchurch and Halle aptly show signs of this transition. In the first of these cases, the perpetrator acted alone, demonstrated his weapons on Twitter and the Meguca site, published a video recording of his attack on the mosque. He also uploaded his manifesto to the information network. In the case of Halle, a 27-year-old man sought to strike a Jewish centre located in the city. He was prepared to shoot a video of the attack using a camera installed on his helmet and to stream the act of violence on the Internet. Like in the Christchurch case, this perpetrator referred to numerous video games and online subcultures in his online discussions and spoke openly about his open planned attack.<sup>157</sup>

The manifestos disseminated online have built into a key form of propaganda intended to provide an ideological justification, a tactical lesson, and motivation for those planning an attack of the same kind. Since 2011, this phenomenon has gained a great deal of attention in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Oslo and Utøya when Anders Breivik published his manifesto. Recently, many people with “ordinary” social and political backgrounds have engaged in terrorist attacks or the planning of such. Researcher Daniel Kohler calls this recent trend hive terrorism, referring to the fact that an increasing number of perpetrators of terrorist offences are totally unknown to the security agencies.<sup>158</sup> The acts of violence are committed mostly in an impulsive manner, without clear or careful preparation, which in several cases has led to tactical errors which ultimately reduced the destructiveness

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157 Koehler, Daniel (2019) The Halle, Germany, Synagogue Attack and the Evolution of the Far-Right Terror Threat. CTC Sentinel. Vol. 12, No. 11. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CTC-SENTINEL-112019.pdf>

158 Koehler, Daniel (2018) Recent Trends in German Right-Wing Violence and Terrorism: What are the Contextual Factors behind ‘Hive Terrorism’? Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 12, No. 6.

of the attacks. Motivated by other perpetrators, actors of this kind have begun to build weapons of their own, for example, using 3D printers. The use of passenger cars and heavy-duty vehicles, as well as knives, in the attacks is also a phenomenon that is typical of our time. Understandably, hive terrorism poses major challenges for both countering attacks and preventing extremism.<sup>159</sup>

## Preventive work in Finland

The work for the prevention of violent extremism is coordinated in Finland by the Finnish Ministry of the Interior. Finland prepared its first national action plan, which has since been updated for the three-year periods 2016–2019 and 2020–2023. Like the Norwegian model, the Finnish programme is broadly based and cross-administrative in its preparation process and enforcement, covering the State administration, organisations, religious communities. The preventive work in Finland is aimed against violent extremism in all its manifestations and is based on guaranteeing the principles of the rule of law. Based on multi-agency cooperation, the situation picture of extremism is followed constantly and the service structure is flexible enough for individuals and communities in need of support can access the services, if necessary, as the situation changes.<sup>160</sup>

Like in Norway, one of the ministries bears the main responsibility. In the case of Finland, this is the Ministry of the Interior and, in particular, a national group of authorities and organisations set up by the Ministry, which has wide national and local coverage.

In preventive work, the police bear the responsibility for intelligence and preliminary investigation, whereas the softer services supporting inclusion, life management and social integration fall within the sphere of responsibility of the public authorities and the NGO sector. The key agency in this sector is the Anchor team which operates in conjunction with the police in

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159 Ibid.

160 Kansallinen väkivaltaisen radikalisoitumisen ja ekstremismin ennalta ehkäisyn toimenpideohjelma 2019–2023. Ministry of the Interior, Helsinki. [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/162073/SM\\_2020\\_1.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/162073/SM_2020_1.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y)

many locations. Anyone can contact this team, for instance, when seeking to separate from the movements or detecting some indications of individuals or communities becoming radicalised. Anchor teams are also in charge of referring customers to more specified services. A range of public sector agencies, such as social and health services, are also engaged in preventive work where the need arises for specific customers.

Local prevention is based on multi-professional cooperation between the authorities and organisations. The subjects of the support measures and services may be individuals at the risk of radicalisation, those threatened by extremist groups or their immediate circles alike. The Ministry of Justice, in turn, is the main funder of preventive NGO work.

In addition to the department of youth and social affairs, the health services and organisations in Finland are some of the key agencies in the prevention of violent extremism. The organisations bear responsibility for the provision of services to help people out of violence and, for example, organising mentoring activities. Studies show that compared with the authorities, these organisations reach elusive groups with greater flexibility.

## **Family support activities**

In the case of Finland, the actual family support activities are still building and taking shape in many ways. At the municipal level, especially the social workers and police focusing on juvenile crime, as well as a wide range of NGO agencies, are engaged in the provision of services.

In very few cases, the projects implemented by the organisations will draw attention primarily to family support activities. The “Muvenna” project of the Forum for Young Muslims, which ended in 2020, was profiled as a project for Muslim young people aged 16–19 years old. It also covered support measures intended for families. The “Unit” project, in turn, implemented by the Deaconess Foundation in 2016–2018, focused on the exit activities of people with immigrant backgrounds being released from prison, but it also drew attention to the family conditions of the customers. Numerous multicultural youth work projects are intended for providing an open and safe space for discussion and recreation to build a positive self-image and support school performance. They include the early prevention of radicalisation as one of their project goals. The only project particularly focused on family support activities is the three-stage “Reach Out” project implemented by Finn Church

Aid in 2016–2021. The project sought to support family resources in situations where some family member has become radicalised. The objective of the project was to start building a family support model and a network of service providers. Relying on these, radicalised individuals could be re-integrated into society. According to the project, successful family support requires, first, that the support is provided as close to the family as possible. This, in turn, means building an efficient, understanding-based cooperation network between the authorities, religious communities and organisations.

The authorities and organisational agencies interviewed for this report invariably thought that in the case of Finland, violent radicalisation is a marginal phenomenon for the time being. Its existence in society was certainly recognised but the overall situation in Finland was considered satisfactory to say the least.

In this respect, the stance of a social worker in charge of juvenile crimes was typical: “Finland has acted sensibly. It has intervened in things at an early stage. It has sought to act before the problem is present.”

According to another social worker, extremist thinking is always a consequence of a range of background factors: “Something happened in the family well before radicalisation. A young person who has a safe home does not join that activity, which is why family support must come early.”

The concerns of the interviewees were more tied to the processes that may lead to the path of extremism than explicitly to extremism. One example of such a process is the gravitation of young people toward groups that engage in violence and maintain a strongly polarised image of population groups. In particular, far-right extremist symbols, such as the hoodies of the Soldier of Odin, had become increasingly visible according to the interviewees. However, these were interpreted as countercultural messages and a provocation of the “opposing camp” rather than as a sign of actual ideological radicalisation. Among the early teenage Muslim youth, in turn, the popularity of martial arts and weekend fights were seen as signs of similar grouping.

The social worker described this process as follows: “The movement of young people often seems to arise out of nowhere. When school started in the autumn of 2109, the mothers of a local area here told us that the children wanted someone to buy them pilot jackets and combat boots. This was

a phenomenon involving young people aged 13–14. Consequently, many young immigrants had been provoked by the dress of these young people.”

According to another social worker, “Fighting is largely about the issue of the side one is on because, in the experience of the young people, they had to belong somewhere. Here we have young immigrants in groups of their own while in the opposing camp, we have young people of the original population boasting extreme right-wing symbols. In fact, only children adopted from Africa or Asia can move freely in the circles of both immigrants and the original population.”

Danish researcher Manni Crone makes a convincing case for the reason why the division of young people into polar groups that engage in occasional violence must be taken seriously. According to her, a great many radicalised individuals have a long history of activity in an environment marked by gang violence or violent crime. Indeed, Crone holds that religion or extreme ideology do not necessarily serve as the primary motivation for extremist violence. The essential thing is that in the process of radicalisation, young people give a new meaning to the violent behaviour they have already adopted before. Then they perceive violence as a way of changing society.<sup>161</sup>

According to many of the interviewees, Islamist extremism, in particular, is still an unknown theme for some representatives of the public authorities, such as teachers and the police. This is due to its limited operational environment in Finland. Any interest in Salafi faith orientation and the practices associated with it is easily interpreted as a sign of radicalisation. Numerous interviewees reported unfounded interventions by schools and the police, which had caused reactions of shock both in the family and the young person and had damaged family confidence in the authorities. Indeed, according to most of the interviewees, the main challenge for the support of both young people and their families stems from the fact that preventive work easily stigmatizes and stereotypes certain groups of people. The interviewees said that the authorities have to gain a better appreciation of the fact that violent extremism can affect anyone, regardless of ethnicity or religion.

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<sup>161</sup> Crone, Manni: Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body. *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 3.

According to one of the interviewees, “It is very important to meet young people together with their families so that the young people do not become targets of intervention who need to defend themselves.”

Another consequence of the marginal nature of the extremist operational environment is that the phenomenon is not adequately recognised at the family level. According to one project employee, especially Muslim parents with an immigrant background in Finland have great difficulties identifying radicalisation because some changes in the young person’s situation in life, such as increasing the time spent at home and in observing the religious faith, may be seen as positive things. According to this interviewee’s experience, the situation of families of Finnish origin, who have converted to Islam can be detected better. The heterogeneous and Muslim population in Finland, which has mostly lived in diaspora, poses challenges of its own to family work. Some of these population groups are so small that the families know one another. The radicalisation of a family member and the support measures for the family reach the ears of the wider community, intensifying feelings of shame and failure. Furthermore, many families are burdened by the trauma presented by the conflict in their home country, financial distress, lack of language skills, concern about relatives living amid the conflict or concerns related to the residence permits of relatives who have recently arrived in Finland. In a situation where some authorities seek to provide support while others appear to be agencies that make integration more difficult, it is not easy to start building confidential relationships.<sup>162</sup>

Time and confidence are factors without which it is impossible to help any young person caught in the radicalisation process or their family. All interviewees emphasised the importance of long-range work and the possibility of building confidence gradually within a long-term comprehensive customer relationship, focusing on the young person’s situation in life with their family and circle of friends, as well as at the stage of studies or a professional career, and enabling them to be referred to more specified services if necessary. In the views of the interviewees, the most serious challenge reported repeatedly was the bureaucratisation of preventive work.

According to one youth worker, many young people and their families can easily get the idea that when problems arise, “they are simply referred from

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<sup>162</sup> See Juntunen, Marko (2016) Poikkeustilan sukupolvet: Irakilaispakolaisuus Suomessa. Publications of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 31/2016.

one service to another.” This interviewee continued by saying, “If I can gain the confidence of young people, I can guide them to other services as necessary because they are confident that I will do it for their best. The action has to be demand-driven rather than by bureaucratic logic where life is broken down into areas of responsibility.”

After building the relationships of trust, the workers begin to consider the young people’s goals and objectives together with them. In the words of an NGO actor who has worked in the area of preventing street violence for a long time, “Then we notice that the objectives will not be reached through violence. We must build a new future—one without violence. At the same time, the young people have to develop new kinds of interaction skills.”

According to this interviewee, it is also important to go through the young person’s violent fantasies as early as possible: “In our organisation, we believe that fantasies are fantasies and plans are plans. We must get a hold of these young people already at the fantasy stage because at the planning stage (of violence), they would no longer speak to us.”

## SUMMARY AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a widely shared view among experts and authorities in the countries covered by this report that the prevention of violent extremism and the detachment from the extremist environment requires comprehensive attention to the social relations and contexts of the radicalized individual. An individual cannot reintegrate into mainstream society without the support of the family and the approval of the surrounding community. However, until very recent years, concrete support measures have focused mainly on the radicalized individual. The psychosocial support needed by the family, the loved ones, and often the entire surrounding community received too little attention in the programs or they were completely ignored. If not enough resources are directed to support the family and the community, the feelings of shame and failure

generated by a radicalized individual can delay or prevent the family/ community from seeking help altogether. International experience of family support models has accumulated in recent years. In some of the countries covered by this report, low-threshold support and counseling services are well developed, while in others they are still in their infancy.

**Recommendation:** Resources should be devoted to long-term psychosocial support activities for families and communities. International cooperation must be stepped up and the experience gained must be used to develop support measures.

2. Peer support networks for parents, especially mothers, have proven to be very effective forms of psychosocial support. Numerous national and international organizations have emerged on the initiative of parents who have experienced the radicalization of their children.

**Recommendation:** The role of peer support networks as an active player in the reintegration of a radicalized individual should be supported. The experiences shared in the networks must be taken into account in the development of programs to prevent violent extremism. The actual support measures for families should be developed in cooperation with the networks and the national and international organizations that have been formed from family networks.

3. Time and trust are factors without which it is impossible to help a young person in the process of radicalization and his family. All interviewees who participated in this study stressed the importance of long-term work. From the information provided in the report's target countries, it seems clear that organizations are more flexible than the public authorities in approaching the hard-to-reach population groups and supporting them.

**Recommendation:** Organizations must be guaranteed sufficient resources to work long-term with families.

4. The planning and implementation of support for radicalized individuals and their families must be based on concrete needs, with the main aim of improving the overall security of society. The person or group responsible for the support activity must be able to take into account the social, mental, and economic challenges of the recipient of the support at the same time. Cooperation in a changing operating environment requires



continuous development between authorities and organizations. Family networks should be involved in the development of support measures.

**Recommendation:** Families with adequate capacity should be involved in the planning of support measures. However, families cannot be responsible for support measures.

5. In target countries where Islamist extremism in particular is a recent phenomenon, some authorities have difficulty in identifying and interpreting the phenomena associated with the radicalization process.

The authorities' knowledge, especially of the ideological and practical dimensions of Islamist extremism, needs to be increased through education.

**Recommendation:** Knowledge of the narratives of Islamist extremism and general religious literacy will be increased through targeted education.

6. In the public debate on violent extremism, radicalized people are often seen as exceptional individuals in their psyche, thoroughly evil, brain-washed by recruiters, or prone to violence because of their cultural heritage.

**Recommendation:** Research-based information on extremist narratives, the radicalization process, the practices of extremist organizations, and the reasons for joining them should be added and included in the public debate.

7. Effective and impartial evaluation provides the best guarantees for the further development of family support programs.

**Recommendation:** Efforts must be made to ensure that the quality and effectiveness assessment, provided by an impartial evaluator, becomes standard practice. Acclaimed experts in the field must be encouraged to develop evaluation criteria.

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