

Background: MI5 report

The making of an extremist

Study identifies those at risk of radicalisation, those who recruit them - and what can be done

Alan Travis, home affairs editor
guardian.co.uk, Wednesday August 20 2008 18:59 BST



A terror camp photo that was used in evidence against 'Osama bin London' Mohammed Hamid, who was jailed indefinitely in March for recruiting and training young men in the UK. Photograph: Metropolitan police/PA

The MI5 briefing note, Understanding Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the UK, seen by the Guardian provides a unique insight into current thinking within the security service about how a modern-day British terrorist is made.

The analysis, based on hundreds of case studies of those involved in or closely associated with terrorism, concludes that there is no single pathway to extremism. All had taken strikingly different journeys to violent extremist activity.

However the security service does say that most individuals in the sample had some vulnerability in their background that made them receptive to extremist ideology.

For most, radicalisation takes months or years with no one becoming a terrorist overnight, and it is always driven by contact with others.

Exposure to extremist ideology, whether in the form of online communities, books, or DVDs, although crucial, is never enough on its own. Personal interaction is essential, in most cases, to draw individuals into violent extremist networks.

Pathways to extremism

The key vulnerabilities identified by MI5 analysts that made those studied receptive to extremist ideology included the experience of migrating to Britain and facing marginalisation and racism; the failure of those with degrees to achieve anything but low-grade jobs; a serious criminal past; travel abroad for up to six months at a time and contact with extremist networks overseas; and religious naivety.

The report says that the relationship between criminality and radicalisation is complex, with some criminals attracted by the violent aspects of terrorism, while -others with a criminal past felt genuine regret



A larger | smaller

UK news
UK security and terrorism

Politics
Terrorism policy

More news

More on this story

Terror: secret MI5 report challenges views on extremists

Explainer: Counter-terrorism strategy

Editorial: Through a glass less darkly

Related

Jul 10 2008
Martin Bell: Davis's big tent

Jul 9 2008
Echoes of cold war as MI5 boosts its anti-spy activities

Mar 5 2007
1,166 anti-terror arrests net 40 convictions

May 12 2006
Bombers slipped through net of watching MI5

Bestsellers from the Guardian shop



Paint Runner
A revolution in paint rolling: no more bending down to charge the roller or balancing with a tray on a ladder leads to less mess!

From: £29.99

- Visit the Guardian offers shop
- Buy eco, organic and fair trade products

Latest news on guardian.co.uk

Last updated less than one minute ago

News

MI5 report challenges views on terrorism in Britain

Sport

Star class team sail to GB's 17th gold

Free P&P at the Guardian bookshop



Country of the Grand
£9.99 with free UK delivery



Bright Shiny Morning
£12.99 with free UK delivery

- Browse the bestseller lists
- Buy books from the Guardian Bookshop

guardianjobs

UK

Search all jobs Go

Legal Manager
Peabody Trust. London Se1. Up to £52,167 pa dependent on skills and experience, plus £4,500 car allowance and private health care.

2 X Researcher (Analyst) / Senior Researcher (Anal...
National Centre For Social Research. London (Ec1v). Salary.

Sessional Lecturers For The Pharmacy Foundation De...
Birkbeck College. Central London. £45.76 per hour or £132.12 per day depending on the area appointed to..

Browse all jobs

USA

Search all jobs Go

for their activities. "Some appeared to have turned to violent extremist groups in the misguided belief that participation in jihad might help atone for previous wrongdoing," MI5 says.

The report adds that some with a criminal past who have been ostracised from mainstream society find themselves accepted by a radical group. "We have noticed that terrorist groups are remarkably tolerant of individuals with serious criminal histories. This is the case even when those individuals continue to be involved in very serious non-terrorist crimes, including drug-trafficking, assault and even rape," it notes.

The psychological impact of these different experiences can be similar — a perception of threat, insecurity, uncertainty or dislocation. The feeling can be triggered by personal or vicarious experiences of inequality, marginalisation, or victimisation, particularly racial or religious attacks, both physical and verbal.

"This feeling is heightened by mainstream UK media coverage that perpetuates negative stereotypes of Muslims, by Islamic and non-Islamic media that reports atrocities against Muslims worldwide, and by the extremist groups themselves who spread the message that Muslims are being ... persecuted, to the point that the only course of action is to fight back with violence."

Radicalising influences

MI5 says it is important not to commit the "logical fallacy" of assuming that all those who share a common experience of dislocating episodes will become terrorists. "What is different about those who ended up involved in terrorism is that they came into contact with existing extremists who recognised their vulnerabilities (and their usefulness to the extremist group)."

The report says that in the past radical clerics featured in this role but "their influence has moved into the background". Their speeches and writings are still important in facilitating radicalisation but more often now charismatic individuals from local communities and their own peers offer potential recruits guidance and act as role models.

The security service says it is important to recognise the role of online communities: "People do not generally become radicalised simply through passive browsing of extremist websites, but many such sites create opportunities for the 'virtual' social interaction that drives radicalisation in the virtual world. Books, DVDs, pamphlets and music all feature in the experiences of British terrorists but their emotional content — eg images of atrocities against Muslims — is often more important than their factual content."

Once involved in an extremist network, powerful social psychological processes bind the individual to the group, including the emotional rewards of belonging. "Membership of a terrorist group can provide a sense of meaning and purpose. It can lead to enhanced self-esteem, and the individual can feel a sense of control and influence over their lives ... some may find psychological security in a belief in future rewards (both in paradise and in the collective memory of the movement) following suicide operations."

The analysis suggests that for dislocated individuals the terrorist group can become "fictive kin", replacing lost ties to family or community. Isolating new or potential recruits through overseas travel, training camps and time spent online helps to encourage them to regard violence as an acceptable form of action.

Promoting disengagement from terrorism

MI5 admits there is no substantial research on disengagement from Islamist terrorism because it is a relatively new phenomenon but the historic record of terrorist groups illustrates that individuals do leave such networks. Individuals may develop negative feelings through personality clashes or may become disillusioned with the aims and tactics of the group. The 1987 Enniskillen bombing led to disillusion among some IRA sympathisers. Despite the "rewards" of martyrdom, individuals may still fear death or be apprehensive about "failing" in an attack and

[Physical Therapist OP Physical Therapy Jobs](#)
cheese.its cities offer arts and culture rivaling the country's big cities. you'll find historic neighborhoods that reflect a strong heritage and festivals that... . Wi.

[Physical Therapist IP Therapy Jobs](#)

cheese.its cities offer arts and culture rivaling the country's big cities. you'll find historic neighborhoods that reflect a strong heritage and festivals that... . Wi.

[FOOTWEAR JOBS - Designers, Line Managers, Colorists](#)

design;graphic arts/illustration;industrial design... forever 21 forever 21 xxi forever for love 21 heritage 1981 reference guess inc g by guess guess guess... . Ca.

[Browse all jobs](#)






spending many years in prison.

A change in priorities such as the birth of a child, or a new relationship or job may take priority over terrorism.

MI5 says this last theme provides one way of preventing radicalisation. "Although it is popular to assume that -people who become terrorists are passively 'brainwashed' into extremism, individuals in fact make active choices to become and remain in extremist activity."

No single measure will reduce radicalisation, it says, but a package targeted at vulnerable groups could include providing fulfilling jobs for young people, better integration of immigrants, effective reintegration of ex-prisoners and the provision of alternatives to the extremist pathway out of "ordinary" criminality.

Law enforcement to disrupt existing networks remains vitally important, MI5 says, but the impact of those who unwittingly exacerbate the perception of threat and marginalisation must not be neglected. "Sections of the media, our own and allies' governments can sometimes make statements that are unwittingly or deliberately provocative. Non-Muslim groups (eg rightwing extremists) can also stoke false fears and resentments, which can heighten the perception of threat in Muslim communities," the report says.

 [Printable version](#)  [Send to a friend](#)  [Share](#)  [Clip](#)  [Contact us](#)

About this article

This article was first published on guardian.co.uk on Wednesday August 20 2008. It was last updated at 09:23 on August 21 2008.

[Related information follows Ads by Google](#)

Related information

UK news

[UK security and terrorism](#)

Politics

[Terrorism policy](#)



Haltemprice and Howden byelection: meet the candidates Gallery (9 pictures): Jul 9 2008: David Davis resigned as shadow home secretary and MP for Haltemprice and Howden in order to draw attention to the government's civil liberties policies. But he is not the only candidate standing in today's byelection

[More galleries](#)

Feb 15 2006
[MPs back ban on 'glorification' of terrorism](#)

Oct 15 2004
[Terror prosecutions curbed by Lords](#)

Dec 30 2001
[MI5 blunders over bomber](#)

Oct 30 2001
[Paul Foot: Who now are Britain's guilty men?](#)



David Davis formally launches byelection campaign

Video (42 sec): Jun 27 2008: The former shadow home secretary launches his campaign 'to protect British freedom' in a byelection with one of the longest lists of candidates ever

[More videos](#)