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

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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 naïvety.

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.
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 meanings 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
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.

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