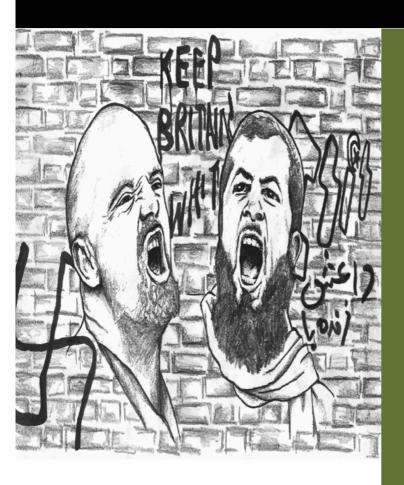# In and Out of Extremism

QUILLIAM

Quilliam is the world's first counter-extremism think tank, set up to address the unique challenges of citizenship, identity, and belonging in a globalized world. Quilliam stands for religious freedom, equality, human rights, and democracy. Challenging extremism is the duty of all responsible members of society. Not least because cultural insularity and extremism are products of the failures of wider society to foster a shared sense of belonging and to advance democratic values. Quilliam seeks to challenge what we think and the way we think. It aims to generate creative, informed, and inclusive discussions to counter the ideological underpinnings of terrorism, whilst simultaneously providing evidence-based recommendations to governments for related policy measures.

"In and Out of Extremism"

How Quilliam Helped 10 Former Far-Right and Islamists Change

Foreword by Maajid Nawaz

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"When I deradicalised I began to think about a part of my identity which had haunted me since I was a child, my sexuality."

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(Former Islamist)

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Excerpt from testimony of Keith

(Former BNP member)

FOREWORD

It is clear that modern extremism is evolving. We must evolve with it. Those on the left, who have traditionally challenged far-right extremism, have often allied with other Islamists in an effort to do so. This inadvertently reinforces the far-right narrative that their opponents on the left are simply blind to fascism when perpetuated within minority community contexts.

On the other hand, those on the right who have traditionally challenged Islamist extremism, are liable to the charge that they are too close to far-right voices; inadvertently falling foul of the accusation that they are really just anti-Muslim bigots in disguise. Likewise, this merely reinforces Islamist narratives that there is a "conspiracy against Islam," rather than helping to debunk such dogma.

Ironically these two extremes of far-right and Islamist serve each other more than the communities they claim to be 'saving'. By peddling exactly the sort of propaganda that the 'other side' claims for its own narrative, a twisted form of symbiosis exists between these otherwise bitter enemies. Those who advocate Muslim separatism will rely on far-right propaganda as evidence that all non-Muslims hate all Muslims. Those who push for the domestic expulsion of Muslims similarly rely on Islamist extremist literature as evidence that Muslims are secretly plotting to destroy our civilisation. The liberal centre-ground is consequently caught in the crossfire between these warring factions. It is no surprise that these two extremes find themselves in agreement to provoke a 'civil war' scenario. It is little wonder that Anders Breivik came to quote, in glowing

terms, al-Qaeda manuals. With every innocent person who is abused by one side or another, polarisation increases and extremists get to claim how impossible it is for us all to live together, when it was they who divided us in the first place.

The absence of a secular liberal voice is polarising communities and encouraging unhealthy aspirations from our youth. Under these circumstances, only the extremists can win in this game of division, community gatekeepers and politicised tribal identity.

We need to remind ourselves that defending secular liberalism is not extreme. It gives us fundamental human rights, such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion. These are the very freedoms that allow someone to believe or leave belief behind, and can provide a fertile ground for peace and tolerance.

By presenting ten testimonies of former far-right and Islamist extremists together in this paper – all of whom have been influenced in some shape or form by Quilliam's work to leave behind elements of their previous bigotry - we aim to demonstrate that there is another way to challenge extremism. Through Quilliam's consistent civil liberties-grounded approach, and our vocal criticism of both far-right and Islamist extremism, while defending everyone's civil liberties and free speech, we seek to cultivate a hard-earned reputation of being fair, while standing up for liberal values against all forms of bigotry. It is this particular approach that enables us to influence polar ends of the extremism debate, far-right and Islamist together. Only by vocally challenging both do we stand a chance of reclaiming the lost centre-ground.

Many of our previous experts have considered 'Macro' or societal and policy factors. This is important because without the right climate, it becomes impossible to speak reasonably about extremism. However, this paper looks at 'micro' or individual factors. In doing so, we wish to acknowledge that both macro and micro strategies are needed to defeat extremism, and they won't always be complementary – yet both are necessary.

Isolation, exclusion, loss and fear are feelings that can be powerful enough to prevent extremists from departing from ideological groups they may secretly harbour doubts about. Leaving behind a polarising and closed group dynamic, along with the identity, belonging and self-assurance it provides, can often be an incredibly traumatic experience for anybody to go through. For this reason, it is absolutely crucial that former extremists know there are those out there who have not only been through such experiences, but are able to provide a sense of belonging to an alternative group.

That group is the pluralistic, democratic, tolerant, peaceful, liberal centre-ground. We hope that by publishing these testimonies, others see that they are not alone. They too can leave their hate behind and join those who instead seek to heal. Furthermore, through this paper, we aim to reassure both those on the populist-right and those on the Islamist ideological side of this debate with whom we have engaged in the past, that we do not simply oppose one group or the other. Rather, we oppose the polarisation that emerges from the entire phenomenon of politicised identity. In this way we seek to focus on our similarities and appreciate our differences while holding firm to the liberal values that allow us to bond on the simple

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fact that we are all human beings with multiple interests, and so many of these overlap.

Do join us if you can.

Maajid Nawaz, Former Islamist

METHODOLOGY

This report is a desk-based study which focuses on the personal testimonies of ten men, who provided a verbal and written understanding of how they overcame both violent and non-violent extremism. Where possible, participants were interviewed by phone and in person; however due to physical constraints, participants also provided written testimonies. Therefore this paper, which focuses on the narratives of former Islamist and far-right extremists, seeks to look at some of the important factors that led to extremists overcoming both violent and non-violent extremism. Five of these testimonies are from former far-right supporters, including individuals who belonged to the British National Party (BNP) and English Defence League (EDL). Five of these testimonies are from ex-Islamists. Four of these individuals belonged to organisations including Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al-Muhajiroun.

The men documented here were based in the UK, Canada and Northern Ireland at the time of their involvement in extremism. Where possible, their geographic location was outlined in their testimony. The decision to focus on the testimonies of ten men was deliberate, as it allowed us to garner an in-depth understanding of their lives and experiences. The analysis extracted from these testimonies does not represent the experiences of all former extremists; however, it does give an insight into factors that influenced their behaviour. All individuals had varying levels of commitment to their cause. Where possible, this was measured by the seniority of the positions held within the extremist organisation. It was also measured by the length of time that they publicly supported the movement, organisation or cause. To protect the identity of

participants, their names and in some cases locations have been anonymised. However, Sohail, who features in the first chapter, has not had his identity anonymised at his request.

It is our intention to follow up on this report with a larger study which encompasses a wider sample of participants from across the European Union and Northern America. It will also draw on the experiences of female extremists, with the hope of highlighting the factors which have enabled women to overcome extremism.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite a great deal of research into the radicalisation process of extremists, there has been significantly less study with respect to the deradicalisation process of those who previously supported an extremist organisation. When we study terrorism, extremism and violent extremism we often focus heavily on tactics and strategy. Yet it is clear that we can learn a great deal if we look at the cognitive and emotional behaviour which underlines a particular set of beliefs.

From this report it is clear that a range of factors contribute towards radicalisation. Events which induce feelings of shame, guilt and vulnerability can often become the catalyst towards radicalisation. Often these events take place during times of transition where challenges, such as an identity crisis, enhance susceptibility to extremism. The use of the Internet to consume propagandist content, or disseminate messages indicates that social media sites in particular are often exploited to reaffirm an extremist position discovered offline. Moreover, the absence of critical thinking and digital literacy skills seems to enhance susceptibility to extremism, as participants would consume and regurgitate material, without critically engaging with the underlying arguments. Simultaneously, conspiratorial websites and sensationalist reporting by some media organisations inflate the sense of threat leading to negative perceptions towards `the other.'

From this report it is also clear that the barriers of discrimination in modern day society have moved superficially. Whilst discrimination is directed towards religion and not skin colour, it is clear that some individuals are unable to

differentiate between race and religion. Instead, they individually construct their own discriminatory framework which often deviates from their intended targets.

The absence of cultural and religious awareness of various minority groups is fuelling this discrimination. Not only does it enhance perceived threats, but it is also used by opportunists to scapegoat ethnic minorities.

However, as highlighted within this report, positive measures can be taken to form an effective deradicalisation strategy. Well-articulated and inspiring counter-messaging, which effectively undermines extremist narratives, can prove powerful when prompting extremists to reflect on their own position. Using image and audio-based material on social media sites is particularly effective when communicating positive messages. Moreover, grassroots initiatives which open up dialogue between experts and society allow people to feel engaged and respected, while also producing valuable insight and rich discussion. Developing personal resilience can enable society to deal with the difficulties and adversaries it encounters, leaving people less susceptible to extremism. Supporting people through times of transition, via outreach programmes in schools, universities and local communities, can contribute towards healthy behaviours and develop more supportive and cohesive communities. Schools and universities can also play a role in developing critical thinking skills through the encouragement of free and independent thinking, which enables students to critically engage with topics. This will encourage students to rationalise their thinking, leaving them less vulnerable to extremism.

Gaining a deep understanding of the deradicalisation process can also provide a useful resource for identifying the challenges people face when overcoming extremism. It opens up an entirely new research area which has fascinating lines of enquiry. It shines a light on human behaviour and the powerful role emotion plays in the decision-making process. It prompts us to assess the mental health issues that can often surround extremists as they go through the deradicalisation process.

Analysing behaviour around deradicalisation is also extremely relevant for policy makers. It can indicate why people choose to adopt a particular ideology, or why they participate in high-risk activism. It also shows why people choose to deradicalise and break away from a particular ideology or organisation. Such information can prove invaluable for law enforcement agencies when they employ "relationship-based" policing, which can cement a strong relationship with the community from which extremists may emerge. Nurturing trust between police and communities will encourage people to report incidents and provide intervention before an extremist gets to the point of joining terrorist groups and committing acts of violence. Even if violence was not a subsequent action for the extremist, such trust and such intervention is for the benefit of social cohesion and integration, preventing the cycle of hate that unfurls if extremism is left unchallenged.

By analysing extremists' journeys in and out of extremism we are able to examine the emotional and cognitive behaviour which often underlines their commitment to a group or cause. All of this knowledge can be built into persuasive and realistic counter-extremism strategies which can prevent radicalisation and offer strategic support to those who have deradicalised.

AUTHORS' NOTE

This report aims to show that there is certainly hope, and that those who have been radicalised can indeed be deradicalised through a number of means which are detailed herein. The overarching theme of the paper details that pluralism is key. Our aim is to provide a resource for policymakers, practitioners as well as researchers concerned with the rise of extremism across the spectrum.

DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND NON-RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

WHO ARE THE FAR-RIGHT?

Far-right individuals or groups tend to aggressively defend national culture and history, even liberty and democracy. They have an authoritative concept of the state, in which the state and the people, all of which are ethnically homogenous, should merge into a single unit. Because there is little agreement on what constitutes far-right extremism from European states, it can be difficult to assess the threat levels across countries. Ironically the far-right have become more adept at mobilising across national boundaries in recent years. Their use of technology and the Internet has enhanced their success. However, far-right groups tend to face significant barriers to success, including incompetent leadership, internal splits and disorganised behaviour. This often results in far-right parties being dismissed as disorganised, weak and non-violent. In effect, governments tend to under-estimate the capabilities of far-right organisations and their influence sometimes goes unnoticed. [1]

WHO ARE ISLAMISTS?

Islamism is a desire to impose any given interpretation of Islam over society and it is viewed by its adherents as a

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[1] Goodwin, Dr Matthew, Vidhya Ramalingam, and Rachel Briggs. The New Radical Right: Violent and Non-Violent Movements in Europe. London: The Institute of Strategic Dialogue, 2012. Web. 17 July 2015. Briefing Paper.

comprehensive ideology. "Its proponents believe that Islam must be placed at the centre of an individual's identity, as either the overriding or the only source of that identity. The Islamist outlook is one that essentially divides the world into two distinct spheres: 'Muslims' and the 'rest'."[2] Islamists hold the belief that a version of Islamic jurisprudence or code of conduct should be implemented as law within existing nation states, or a pan-Islamic theocracy (*Khilafah*). "The absence of a purist Islamic State is judged to be responsible for the current problems of the Muslim world"[3]. If such a state is re-established, it is thought to bring the Muslim world to global pre-eminence. [4]

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN FAR-RIGHT AND ISLAMIST EXTREMISTS

Both groups tend to:

- justify the use of violence instead of persuasion;

- prefer uniformity over diversity;

[2] Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, Choosing Our Friends Wisely: Criteria for engagement with Muslim groups (London: Policy Exchange, 2009), p. 18. In Schmid, Alex. Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides Of The Same Coin? The Netherlands: The International Centre.

[3] Schmid, Alex. Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides Of The Same Coin? The Netherlands: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2014. [online] http://www.icct.nl/publications/icct-papers/violent-and-non-violent-extremism-two-sides-of-the-same-coin- 17 July 2015.

[4] Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, Choosing Our Friends Wisely: Criteria for engagement with Muslim groups (London: Policy Exchange, 2009), p. 18. In Schmid, Alex. Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin? The Netherlands: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2014. [online] http://www.icct.nl/publications/icct-papers/violent-and-non-violent-extremism-two-sides-of-the-same-coin- 17 July 2015.

- have collective goals over individual freedom; and

- give orders instead of using dialogue.

WHO ARE SAUDI SALAFISTS?

Saudi Salafism is a movement which emerged in the 19th Century in Saudi Arabia. It has been growing in recent decades, most notably among uprooted people who are estranged from their ethnic culture. Saudi Salafists take vacuous and literal interpretations of a holy script, and use these as a blueprint for how a society should conduct itself. There are different forms of Saudi Salafism, including apolitical, political and militant / jihadist. Saudi Salafism poses challenges vis-a-vis prevailing western norms and liberal democratic values. Its followers largely reject integration with Western states and prefer medieval interpretations of the Quran and other Islamic sources, thus rejecting religious and moral pluralism.

There is a non-Saudi version of Salafism that peaked in 19th century Egypt as a precursor to the forming of the first Islamist group, The Muslim Brotherhood. This Salafi movement was anti-tradition, preferring to shred the four main Sunni schools of thought and was thoroughly modernist in its outlook. Its leading lights were Afghani, Ridda and Abduh but unfortunately when 19th century European modernity came to mean fascism, this movement morphed with it into Islamism. When we refer to 'Salafism' in this report, we refer to Saudi-Salafism (also known as Wahhabism) and not its Egyptian rival.

EXTREMIST GROUPS MENTIONED IN THIS REPORT

ENGLISH DEFENCE LEAGUE (EDL)

The English Defence League originated as a one-man blog, and went on to become a leading far-right group within the European Counter-Jihad Movement (ECJM).

There were four key themes within the EDL's discourse:

- pan-Islamic war against the West;

- Muslim demographics and the decline of the United Kingdom;

- State-controlled media manipulation and the Islamification of the United Kingdom; and

- Muslim immigration

Thus the EDL was intertwined with issues regarding terrorism, British identity and immigration. The group can best be described as a fluid cultural nationalist movement, which often has incoherent strategies and movements. [5] The EDL was dealt a serious blow from which it is yet to recover when Quilliam facilitated the resignation of its founding member leader and its deputy leader at the same time. [6]

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[5] Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, and Hans Brun. A Neo-Nationalist Network: The English Defence League and Europe's Counter-Jihad Movement. London: ICSR, 2015. Print.
[6] Quilliam Foundation 2013 http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/press/quilliam-facilitates-tommy-robinson-leaving-the-english-defence-league/

BRITISH NATIONAL PARTY (BNP)

The British National Party has been described as fascist, or neo-fascist, by many for its use of racially nationalist and fascist policies. Often the party has been accused of adopting a "moderate public face to hide an ideological core". Principally the BNP plays on a patriotic appeal to Britain and Britishness. The presence of ethnic minority communities underwrites all of its policies, though its presence is usually alluded to through a strategy of calculated ambivalence.[7]

Al-MUHAJIROUN

Al-Muhajiroun is a terrorist organisation, proscribed by Labour Home Secretary Alan Johnson, which has its origins in the internal schism of the pan-Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir. Its goal was to spread their interpretation of Islam through the establishment of a Caliphate.[8] The group used the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to spread its pan-Islamist agenda in Britain. However, the negative media profile it received from all sectors, and its proscription led to the group being disbanded in 2004.[9] The group subsequently re-emerged into multiple groups before its proscription in 2010.

[7] Richardson, John. 'Race and Racial Difference: The Surface and Depth of BNP Ideology'. British National Party: Contemporary Perspectives. Nigel Copsey and Graham Macklin. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2013. 38-61. Print.

[8] Hopenothate.org.uk,. 'Hate Files: The Al-Muhajiroun Network'. N.p., 2015. Web. 20 July 2015.(http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/hate-groups/am/)

[9] Abbas, Tahir. Islamic Radicalism and Multicultural Politics: The British Experience. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.

HIZB UT-TAHRIR

Hizb ut-Tahrir originated in the Palestinian territories in 1953, influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. Since then the group expanded its membership to countries which had a strong migrant population, including Europe, Asia and Africa. The group wants to establish a Caliphate and is fuelled by an ideology which is sustained through an intra-network based on a franchise model of governance, which is run centrally from the Middle East[10]. Unlike Al-Muhajiroun, the group restricts its desire to create a Caliphate to Muslim majority countries only yet it desires to create the conditions and demonstrate the case for political Islam in the West. While it claims to abstain from terrorist activities, the group provides a fertile ground for extremism and is not opposed to violence. [11]

[10] Dalacoura, Katerina. Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.

[11] Hopenothate.org.uk, 'Hate Files: Hizb Ut-Tahrir'. N.p., 2015. Web. 20 July 2015. (http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/hate-groups/ht/)

KEY FINDINGS

THE RADICALISATION FACTORS

Shame and guilt appeared as some of the main emotional factors which sparked radicalisation. Participants described various events that fostered feelings of vulnerability, which culminated in an identity crisis. This manifested a deep sense of guilt and/or shame which sparked their interest in extremism.

Participants engaged in extremist activity, or supported a cause to inflate their sense of self-worth and to find a place to belong. A central theme of a grievance (whether perceived or real) was common amongst the former extremists. A sense of community and belonging was also a key factor in this process as evidenced in the testimonies.

For former far-right extremists, religion appeared as a cause for more prejudice than skin colour, indicating that the barriers towards discrimination have shifted.

This was due to:

- the anti-Muslim propagandist material consumed online such as conspiracy stories concerning 9/11

- media coverage concerning threats to national security, identity and values also shaping their negative perception of Muslims; and

- clothing worn in public spaces such as the Niqab (a cloth that covers the face worn by some Muslim women), viewed as an act of self-segregation and an insult to Western values.

However, former far-right participants stated that at times they struggled to differentiate between race and religion and would often discriminate against individuals who fit their stereotype. This indicates that there may be a lack of religious and cultural awareness of ethnic minorities. It also may indicate that negative perceptions of Islam are based on ignorance of faith. This lack of awareness is fuelling anti-Islamic sentiment and negatively shaping perceptions of Muslim communities.

The Internet was an important tool used to consume extremist content and disseminate messages. Social media platforms, and self-created echo chambers within these platforms, were realised as being particularly important for participants when collecting information.

Participants were able to consume and regurgitate extremist material, yet they were unable to critically engage with the content. This indicates that the absence of critical thinking skills made participants more vulnerable to extremism.

When placed in new situations, such as moving into a new community or school, some participants felt vulnerable and isolated. Thus, the absence of resilience and community during challenging transitionary periods, encouraged participants to migrate towards extremist groups.

However, for some who were already radicalised, new surroundings sometimes emboldened them and drew them further into the extremist discourse.

THE DERADICALISATION PROCESS

Positive counter-speech initiatives effectively countered the extremist narrative; however, separate factors influenced the impact of counter-speech initiatives for members of these two groups:

- former Islamist participants acknowledged that it was the speakers' ability to undermine the foundations of the extremist narrative through a theological lens, which encouraged them to reflect and challenge their extremist ideology; whereas

- former far-right participants stated that the coherent and articulated delivery of the counter-narrative was an important factor which enabled them to engage with the narrative.

Image and audio based material, including audio tapes and recorded interviews, appeared highly effective when initially prompting participants to reflect on their extremist narrative. This eventually led them to research more written material, including blogs and books, enabling them to overcome their extremist views.

The Internet was a powerful tool used by participants to deradicalise. It enabled them to access and research content such as speeches and interviews, on sites such as YouTube, which contributed towards deradicalisation. This indicates that the Internet can have both a positive and negative impact on countering extremism.

Accessing stories of people who faced similar challenges prompted participants to reflect on their own commitment to

extremism. The personal narratives of Quilliam staff, including Maajid Nawaz and Dr Usama Hasan, proved particularly powerful because it enabled participants to overcome challenges, and normalise their own process of deradicalisation.

Deconstructing the Islamist ideology through a theological lens was fundamental for former Islamist participants. The views of Dr Usama Hasan and his ability to undermine the Islamist discourse through theology were given greater legitimacy by participants due to his religious qualifications.

Opening up dialogue between participants and experts enabled individuals to feel engaged and respected. Notably the use of informal communications between Quilliam and participants was particularly significant as it enabled these individuals to feel heard and respected, which enhanced their commitment to Quilliam and counter-extremism.

Interestingly, recent literature has suggested that undermining the ideological factors plays no role in persuading people to leave an extremist group[12]. However, within this report it is evident that countering the ideology which underpins the extremist narrative is absolutely fundamental to deradicalisation. Not only does it encourage critical engagement, but it also prompts individuals to reflect on their own commitment to extremism and to see examples of those who have succeeded in adapting their personal narrative. There are varying schools of thought around the world, but as displayed in the testimonies to follow; this was imperative for former Islamist participants in this report.

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[12] Elshimi, Mohammed. 'Prevent 2011 And Counter-Radicalisation: What Is De-Radicalisation'. *Counter-Radicalisation: Critical Perspectives*. Christopher Baker-Beall, Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Lee Jarvis. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 2015. 206-223. Print.

Open dialogue at a grassroots level also produced rich discussion and valuable insight which contributed to a deeper understanding of extremism.

Non-conformity to religious clothing by Muslim members of Quilliam when appearing in broadcast media fostered greater trust for some former far-right participants. This indicates that visual conceptions of Islam, such as clothing, were negatively perceived by former far-right participants.

Government funded counter-extremist initiatives and institutions fostered mistrust among participants. The negative perception of them was also exploited to inflate feelings of fear and suspicion. This indicates that the relationship between civic society and the government may pose a challenge when overcoming extremism.

THE ROLE OF QUILLIAM

From analysing the various testimonies it is clear that Quilliam is viewed by these individuals as an important organisation, which effectively strikes a balances between the ideals and realities of deradicalisation. It is Quilliam's effectiveness as an organisation which has enhanced its ability to counter extremism. Set out below are some factors which influenced the participants' opinion of Quilliam.

NARRATIVES

The personal stories of Quilliam staff, including Maajid Nawaz and Dr Usama Hasan, have been fundamental to Quilliam's success at deradicalising violent extremists. Both Maajid and Usama are former extremists, with Maajid being a previous member of the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir and Usama being a Salafi-jihadi preacher as well as a former jihadist. Each testimony highlighted the importance of these personal stories when delivering counter-narratives. Upon hearing these personal stories it prompted the then-extremists to rethink their own commitment to the cause. One person's testimony acknowledged that researching Maajid's departure from Islamism prompted him to completely rebuke it for himself.

It is clear that narratives remain fundamental to human understanding, communication and social interaction. By accessing the personal stories of a number of Quilliam staff, it enabled participants to explain and interpret certain events, and normalise their own process of deradicalisation.

THEOLOGY

The ability of Quilliam to provide nuanced arguments which highlight the political and religious errors of modern Islamist movements have been highly important. This factor was particularly important for participants who were previous Islamists. The expertise of Dr Usama, a part-time Imam and senior Researcher at Quilliam, has enabled Quilliam to deconstruct the foundations which underpins the jihadist narrative. This is important as four of the five ex-Islamists who provided a testimony, highlighted that it was Quilliam's authority to counter the theological base of Islamism, which sparked their deradicalisation.

Furthermore, Dr Hasan's position discredits the common misconception that maintaining a strong Muslim identity is incompatible with mainstream non-extremist society. His work continues to show the compatibility between Islam and "British Values", the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and life as a fully engaged citizen in a liberal secular democracy. It also rebukes the oft-assumed notion that deradicalisation equates to an abandonment of religion.

OPEN DIALOGUE

Quilliam maintains an open dialogue with a number of former extremists. This has been fundamental for participants overcoming their prejudices. Participants commented that their ability to get in touch with Haras Rafiq, Dr Usama Hasan and Maajid Nawaz, by phone or email has provided them with a sense of security. This open dialogue permits participants to feel heard, respected and validated. The emphasis on listening and

responding fosters the co-existence of multiple, yet equally valid points of view. This ultimately enables the individual to reflect on his own purposes, intentions and aims.

Ironically, it appears that more informal modes of communication, such as sending a text message, have enabled participants to feel more engaged with Quilliam. Formality within communication has a tendency to connect position and not people. Thus, by maintaining informal modes of communication, Quilliam has been able to build stronger relationships and further mutual interdependence. It is possible that having access to an organisation which is prominent in the media has also increased the participants' sense of self-worth.

This open dialogue has been extremely beneficial for Quilliam. It has elicited a deeper understanding of the issues, and the values and beliefs which underpin different forms of extremism, as well as the phenomena of radicalisation and deradicalisation, supplementing more academic research. Rich discussion has produced valuable insight from diverse perspectives. By working at a grassroots level, it has allowed Quilliam to possess a deeper understanding of these issues.

From this report it is clear that open dialogue between organisations and individuals and their communities permits people to feel that they are contributing to tackling a social ill as an active British citizen. It is also evident that a grassroots approach where informal modes of communication exist, increases engagement and produces new ideas and perspectives.

APPEARANCE

The physical appearance of members Muslim communities within Britain was highlighted as a significant factor which fuelled hatred towards Muslims by participants from the far-right. While this is unacceptable and should be challenged, it appears that non-conformity to traditional Muslim dress by members of Quilliam staff, when on television, was a factor which fostered trust and legitimacy from members of the far-right.

The traditional clothing worn by many Muslims helps develop and reinforce their identity, thus serving a specific social need. However, this conformity to Islam through dress is often used to discriminate. This perhaps ties in with Britain's modern tradition of secularism, which is built on the idea that beliefs and worship should be conducted in private. Therefore, some view the public emergence of Islam, through dress, as being in direct conflict with British values.

Many right wing participants stated that the "absence of religious clothing" by members of Quilliam staff when on television acted as a legitimising agent which fostered greater trust and awareness of Quilliam. This highlights that religious Muslim clothing is perceived as a threat to British values by some factions in British society. In addition, it indicates that non-verbal triggers will continue to be an important factor worthy of addressing when countering extremism.

FUNDING

How Quilliam sources funding was a factor which influenced the participants' opinions of Quilliam. Up to 2011, Quilliam received funding from the public sector, a factor that is openly acknowledged by the organisation. During this time, many extremists viewed Quilliam as a puppet of the government. Quilliam's perceived funding sources were also used by members of affiliated extremist organisations to justify their views. This indicates that government-led strategies, or government-funded organisations, can be negatively perceived by some individuals in communities vulnerable to radicalisation.

There needs to be greater credibility of government strategies which can be brought about in two ways:

- governments needs to provide a clear direction of their views concerning extremism and communicate their stance on the issue clearly to the public; and

- by encouraging civic-led initiatives, which can enhance public engagement and foster greater credibility from society. It will enable civic society to be actively engaged and elicit a deeper understanding of the phenomena, which will contribute to community cohesion.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The positive role the Internet can have on deradicalisation needs to be acknowledged. Social media sites appeared as particularly important platforms used by participants to collect information. Videos and images appeared more effective when initially prompting participants to reflect on their own extremist position. Therefore, visual counter-extremist material, including interviews and short films, should be used more effectively on social media sites.

Counter-narratives which seek to undermine the extremist discourse need to be engaging, inspiring and articulate. The use of humour can effectively engage an audience whilst promoting solidarity among listeners. This can enable viewers to effectively understand an idea or issue. There also needs to be a departure from the use of dense language which can confuse or cloud a message. Instead, counter-narratives should be constructed using language which is accessible and easily understood.

The absence of digital literacy skills often failed to prevent participants from engaging in risky behaviour online. Developing digital literacy skills can be established through programmes at school and universities. These skills will rationalise behaviour on the Internet and reduce vulnerability to extremist content online.

Religious and cultural illiteracy similarly contributes towards a distorted perception of the Islamic faith, for both Islamist and far-right extremists. This ignorance can be addressed if willing Muslim figures play a positive role to educate communities on the multiplicity of interpretations within Islam and how Muslim

identity is not incompatible with other elements of identity. This will counteract the false interpretations promoted by groups like Islamic State, al Qaeda and Islamists in general and make people more resilient against their propaganda. Online forums which deconstruct the Islamist narrative through a theological lens should establish bigger presences online to educate society on the Islamic faith. Forums developed should be highly interactive to foster greater engagement with the audience.

It is clear that the barriers towards discrimination have superficially moved from skin colour to religion. There remains a clear absence of cultural and religious awareness of ethnic minorities. Therefore, religious curriculums at schools need to incorporate a broader cross-cultural and religious approach to educate pupils of different religions and cultures. As second generation immigrants are most at risk of radicalisation this will also enable them to gain a deeper understanding of their ethnic identities and diminish their chance of having an identity crisis which often acts as a catalyst towards extremism.

The absence of critical thinking skills is leaving people more vulnerable to extremist material. Our methods of testing in schools and universities is encouraging students to consume and regurgitate answers, without promoting the development of critical thinking skills. These skills are crucial for student engagement and to nurture unique insights. Schools and universities should encourage more free and independent thinking by rewarding original and creative work. This will encourage rational thinking and create more resilience when individuals encounter extremist material.

Negative perceptions of government-led strategies can be overcome by focusing more on civic-led initiatives. A grassroots

approach will foster greater credibility and engagement from the public. It will enable society to feel part of the solution, not the bystanders of a government strategy. This will also lead to a more nuanced understanding of the issue and leave people less susceptible to scaremongering from sensationalist media coverage.

The media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, however the sensationalist style of reporting deployed by certain media organisations needs to be curtailed in two areas:

- terrorist and extremist activities within the UK and abroad. Some media organisations need to be more responsible when covering terrorist activities and report facts. They need to depart from using provocative language which creates a sense of fear and threat and contributes towards a divisive culture of suspicion; and

- anti-immigration rhetoric which is becoming a prominent feature across European states needs to be more responsible. The overuse of negative stereotyping of immigrants is contributing towards negative perceptions of Muslim communities within Britain and across Europe.

TESTIMONIES FROM FORMER EXTREMISTS

1. FORMER UNIVERSITY ISOC LEADER: SOHAIL'S STORY

Sohail came from a "pretty standard Muslim family". His father had moved to the UK at the age of three and his mother moved over from Pakistan when she married his father. While the family identified as Muslim, religion was not a defining factor of Sohail's early childhood years.

However, when Sohail reached the age of seven this soon changed. A strong relationship formed between Sohail's family and another family who lived in their tower block. This family were Salafi Muslims and, through this friendship, Sohail's parents began to attend a mosque in London and listened to preachers preach an extremist interpretation of Islam.

Soon Sohail was "banned from listening to music and from watching TV", and was regularly "taken out of assemblies" to prevent the mixing of the sexes. At this time, Sohail also began attending after-school classes where charismatic preachers would indoctrinate the audience. Sohail actively studied a Salafi interpretation of Islam, which further indoctrinated him into extremism. Championing hatred for all non-Muslims soon became a strong feature of Sohail's upbringing.

When Sohail began attending college, he was "one of the main guys of the Islamic society" and would preach his extremist views to his fellow students. Sohail became so well-known as a religious leader of his group that he was often referred to as "Sheikh-ul-Islam". His preaching acted as a radicalising agent for many of his listeners, including one man who "left to fight for Islamic State".

No-one ever criticised or interrupted these preaching sessions at college, which emboldened Sohail to continue his mission and failed to prevent his destructive influence on his colleagues.

At this time, Sohail began seriously thinking of carrying out an attack in the United Kingdom. Sohail openly acknowledges that his inability to access explosive material was the single factor which prevented him from launching an attack on British soil.

However, when Sohail started attending Queen Mary University in London to study sciences, he began to question the basic assumptions of the religion he had been taught. This coincided with his introduction to the teachings of Dr Usama Hasan. Most importantly, Sohail witnessed a thawing of Usama's beliefs on the Theory of Evolution. Fueled by his passion for science, Sohail began to look at the "apparent contradictions between Islamic scripture and the Theory of Evolution". He soon realised that it made sense that "evolution did happen". Sohail was also introduced to Usama's 'Unity1' blog online and began listening to the views of Maajid Nawaz. Maajid's story had a huge impact on Sohail - most notably when Maajid spoke of his own struggle to grapple with "questions about democracy, slavery and human rights". Through listening to Maajid, Sohail realised that the "classical scholars openly discussed these questions". This encouraged him to explore other, more progressive interpretations of Islam, and showed him that "reason and logic do have a place in the arena of personal beliefs".

At this time, Sohail began to think deeply about a part of his identity which had "haunted him since he was a child" - his sexuality. Since he was seven or eight, Sohail "knew that he was attracted to boys" - a fact "which deeply confused" him. He was always aware that homosexuality was classed as "evil" under his

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then Salafi interpretation of Islam. Sohail admits to feeling deeply ashamed of his sexuality and he "used Islam and extremism as means to cure his homosexuality". By embedding himself within an extremist ideology and worldview, Sohail was trying to eliminate feelings of shame and guilt by immersing himself in a different identity. Sohail believes that the confusion he felt over his sexuality was common among his radicalised peers. From his interaction with these men and the questions they raised regarding homosexuality, Sohail believes that others were also confused over their sexuality and were also using Islamism as cure for or distraction from their perceived demons.

When Sohail eventually accepted that he was gay, he admits that the negative perception of homosexuality in Islam caused him to question his commitment to Islam. Today Sohail admits that he still faces challenges which have had a huge impact on his mental health stemming from his history as an Islamist, and he remains focused on overcoming these difficulties.

The decontextualised and piecemeal approach to Islam by literalists reaffirms the need for Islam to be reconciled with aspects of modernity. The realignment of Islam with universal human rights and Muslims' embracement of evolving social structures, including homosexuality, gender equality and technology is important to this. Most notably, this evolution needs to occur within the spirit of Islam, which is compassion.

To feel 'evil' due to one's sexual identity should not be accepted as a reasoned aspect of a religion which historically champions tolerance. Sohail, while an extremist, failed to reconcile two important aspects of his identity. First, he rejected his sexuality in favour of his religion, then considered rejecting his religion in favour of his sexuality. By reforming Islamic thought to be

compatible with universal human rights including the freedom of sexuality, this tension need not exist.

It is clear that one of the factors which encouraged Sohail to commit to Islamist extremism was to control his identity or repress it. Struggling with one's identity can lead to profound psychological malaise. Within this environment, violent behaviour can easily erupt as the individual is attempting to make sense of themselves and is vulnerable to those who offer 'easy solutions'. Attempting to repress an identity, such as homosexuality, encouraged Sohail to embrace Islamism in an effort to 'cure' or 'hide' from his sexuality. Sohail's story should prompt us to question the relationship between mental illness and vulnerability to radicalisation. This suggests that mental health practitioners need to be part of the discussion on countering extremism on a micro level.

This testimony highlights the significant impact extremist preachers can have on an individual. As stated by Sohail, it was his attendance at a mosque that played a significant role in his radicalisation. Islamist doctrine and opposition to critical thinking enables preachers to achieve consensus on extreme ideas by manipulating the fears of the audience. By cloaking political interests in religious language, preachers present an ideology as orthodox religious thought, and can portray political action, whether violent or not, as an ethical or religious duty for their audience. Sohail's time at his local mosque was significant: first, it sped up his radicalisation; secondly, it provided him with the tools and technique to radicalise others; but lastly, it sparked his deradicalisation as he was able to listen to the views of Dr Usama Hasan on Islam's compatibility with science and encouraged him to eventually liberalise his own views.

There appears to be a lack of positive high-profile Muslim role models in society. This testimony reaffirms the positive impact they can have on individuals vulnerable to or supportive of extremism, by offering hope, guidance, expertise or simply by sharing their experience. Usama garnered great respect from Sohail and played a significant, though passive, role in his deradicalisation. As long as young people continue to be vulnerable to peer pressure, there will be a need for positive role models to counteract the influence of extremist charismatic recruiters. Moreover, if these positive role models can provide theological counter-narratives to extremism by transmitting an interpretation of Islam that is compatible with human rights and British values, extremist discourse can be undermined.

Familial relationships remain equally important to countering extremism. By offering a support network and emotional counter-narratives, families can act as an alternative solution to the problems faced by young people, away from the prism of Islamism. However, families can also be part of the problem by being a negative ideological influence, by failing to question extremism, or by promoting one narrow element of identity over all others. Unfortunately Sohail's testimony represents the latter - it was the extremist ideological influence from his family and friends which sowed the seeds of his radicalisation and almost had violently disastrous consequences.

2. FORMER BNP SENIOR ACTIVIST: KEITH'S STORY

Keith was a former organiser for the far-right political party, the British National Party (BNP), who actively supported the policies of the group. In the process of leaving the group Keith began to analyse what had led him to get involved with the BNP.

Keith's journey began when he joined the British army immediately after leaving school at the age of 16. Nationalism and patriotism was instilled in Keith through a "brutalising process lovingly referred to as weeding out the weak", which extracted all non-conformers of the British Army system. This ethos was stamped on Keith's "childlike mind" and it later went on to colour his "perception of the world". Keith developed a mentality that the British Empire was a superior nation to others and this sowed the seed for a discriminatory worldview.

Upon completing service in the first Gulf War, Keith left the army and was unknowingly "suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder", due to what he had witnessed in Iraq. Keith "was on a slippery slope" which culminated in a jail sentence for grievous bodily harm. His strong patriotic and nationalist spirit remained constant throughout his prison sentence.

When Keith was released from jail, he quickly discovered the BNP and stayed within the organisation for the following six years, moving up the ranks to hold a senior position within the party.

His testimony as shared with Quilliam highlights the importance of bridging the gap for people coming out of prison. There are many difficult challenges for those leaving prison, which are often difficult to overcome. Many of these individuals remain vulnerable to radicalisation during this transition. It is important

that support and stability is provided while they try to reintegrate into mainstream society.

As a member of the BNP, Keith was often deeply uncomfortable with their focus; however, he muted these feelings and continued to publicly champion their ideology. After a number of years within the party, Keith found himself "digging deeper into reasons" for why he should "stand and publicly support BNP policies".

However, the BNP's ideology began to generate significant controversy for their fascist and anti-immigrant policies. The "rubbish coming from Nick Griffin was so blatantly obvious" that it encouraged Keith to resign from the party.

It became evident to Keith that his reason for becoming a BNP member was the "great many ex-forces" who were among the party's ranks. This acted as a pull factor for Keith, who, upon leaving prison, needed to belong to a group which championed his patriotic ideals. The party provided Keith with an alternative avenue, through which he could funnel his nationalist ideals. Membership to the party also enabled Keith to surround himself with people who shared similar experiences of war and the army. Like many extremists, Keith was encouraged to join the BNP to revert to the former identity he had maintained before entering prison. This highlights that identity crisis remains an important factor which can be manipulated to create the conditions for extremism.

Keith is happy that he has turned his back on the BNP and he continues to rebuke all far-right groups and their ideologies. He reached out to Quilliam for further advice on his personal transformation.

3. FORMER AL-MUHAJIROUN: ABDUL'S STORY

The eldest of five siblings, Abdul grew up in a diverse community in London. His "Pakistani upbringing" was closely-bound by cultural expectations, but his family was not particularly religious. For example, during religious seasons such as Ramadan, Abdul would fast but he would not pray.

Growing up in a multicultural area, Abdul enjoyed mixing with people from different religions and cultures. However, just before attending sixth-form college, Abdul was made aware of a "group of young boys", who would target members of the Asian community, and "constantly mug them" as they walked down the street. This fostered a deep feeling of vulnerability in Abdul, as he did not have "brothers or cousins who could protect him".

During this time, Al-Muhajiroun, a violent splinter group of Hizb ut-Tahrir that is now proscribed as a terrorist organisation, became prominent in his area by offering protection to local Asian communities. A "group of thuggish boys from Al-Muhajiroun would regularly go to local schools and colleges" to terrorise non-Muslim students. Abdul appreciated the protection Al-Muhajiroun offered him, and was attracted to the gang mentality of the group. Abdul was encouraged by the group to attend their local mosque, and soon Abdul began attending sessions where preachers discussed sensationalist topics. Al-Muhajiroun exploited his vulnerability and manipulated the grievances he felt about life in London, then immediately sought to address these problems by offering Islamism, dressed up as Islam, as a solution. Preachers regularly used humour to deliver their messages and Abdul noted that this was particularly useful when capturing the attention of the audience and indoctrinating them with Islamist messaging.

Soon Abdul became enthralled by these discussions. Showing promise as a student of Islamism, Abdul was sent to Finsbury Park Mosque, which at that time had been taken over by the now jailed jihadist cleric Abu Hamza. At the mosque, Abdul became fully indoctrinated by listening to speakers who preached a literalist and, often militant, interpretation of Islam. Abdul was also provided with what he called "Jihad training", which "included martial arts training", to prepare himself for the fight to establish the Caliphate.

Abdul admits that at this time he was having an identity crisis. Sold as a solution to this crisis, he was "surrounded by people who told him he was Muslim, not British". This burden encouraged him to digest Islamist extremism. The sessions at Finsbury Park Mosque turned everything into black and white, 'Islam vs the West' and normalised the Islamist narrative for Abdul.

Soon Abdul started attending demonstrations and "travelled up and down the country, getting into really hard-core stuff" such as indoctrinating others and protesting against 'Western evils'. Abdul witnessed a lot of young people becoming indoctrinated to the group and became aware of the tactics used to drive young people towards the organisation. These tactics included the promise of a "really good-looking and really intelligent partner". Pornography was also justified by the group in an attempt to elicit support for the organisation. Abdul admits that the heightened sense of guilt felt after watching pornography forced these boys to attend the mosque to seek forgiveness, where they would be further radicalised. These tactics, and others, were used as recruitment tools to groom young and impressionable British Muslims.

When Abdul went to university, he joined Hizb ut-Tahrir, who were viewed by many as "the coolest group to join", as "they presented themselves really nicely in suits and spoke very intellectually". Hizb ut-Tahrir were seen as exclusive and only a select few were admitted into the group based on the individuals' intellectual ability. This enhanced their standing within the university, as young men were desperate to gain admission into the clique.

However, Abdul's family began to notice a big change in him and began to dissuade him from hanging around with the boys "who were bad news". Abdul challenged his family to counter the extremist ideology through the Quran. His family was unable to provide a counter-narrative because they did not have a sufficiently deep theological understanding of Islam and Abdul used this as proof that the extremist ideology he consumed was true Islam. His commitment to extremism became so closely bound to his identity, and there was so little effective opposition to his worldview, that Abdul soon began preparing to flee the UK to fight Jihad.

However after stumbling across Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, a prominent Sufi scholar from America, Abdul started to listen to his sermons online. He then began to "buy his tapes for a pound", and began to question how Hamza's "version of Islam did not reconcile with the Islam endorsed by Hizb ut-Tahrir". Hamza's fluency in Arabic and his nine-year stint in a desert learning the Quran increased his legitimacy in Abdul's eyes and resulted in Abdul viewing Hamza as a more legitimate Islamic authority than Hizb ut-Tahrir.

The skills Abdul had established through University studying law also enabled him to question the extremist ideology

championed by Hizb ut-Tahrir. Studying law encouraged him to "constantly ask questions and look at the rationale underpinning an issue". It was these critical thinking skills which enabled Abdul to see the hypocrisy and irrationality which underpinned the Islamist ideology, the charismatic recruiters of Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the extremist group itself.

This caused Abdul to lose support for both the organisation, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the underpinning ideology, Islamism. Instead of attending demonstrations or listening to extremist preachers, Abdul began to research Islam for himself and "became a lot more spiritual". This research enabled Abdul to become a lot more articulate and to "understand society a lot more", which ultimately set Abdul on the path to deradicalisation.

While Abdul had to overcome many challenges, today he champions the work Quilliam has embarked upon as a key support to this journey. Maajid Nawaz's life story acted as a powerful anecdote for Abdul and it helped him to understand his own past. Abdul also states that the atrocities committed by ISIL have further distanced him from Islamist extremism and have pulled him closer to Islam, while also encouraging him to champion ideals of tolerance and respect.

This testimony emphasises the cultural and religious gap which often prevails between families of Muslim communities living in the UK. Within families there can be disparities between a parent's and a child's understanding of Islam. This is entirely normal and should not be a cause for tension in a society that respects freedom of religion and pluralism. Extremist organisations use this as a cognitive opening to manipulate young recruits, furthering an identity crisis by propagating the notion that your parents don't know the "true" Islam and

dismantling a support network that could prevent radicalisation. When Abdul subsequently challenged his family to rebuke the extremist ideology through the Quran, they were unable to do so and Abdul used this to legitimise the extremist views of Hizb ut-Tahrir. This testimony emphasises the important role families could play to counter the jihadist narrative, if they are empowered to do so. This includes religious counter-narratives, critical thinking skills, a raised awareness about the dangers of extremism and extremist organisations, how to spot the signs of radicalisation and what to do about it.

This story also shows the multiplicity of counter-narratives that could be effective in challenging extremism. Rather than being simply one magic formula, there is a role to play for theological, spiritual, intellectual, political, satirical, emotional and social counter-narratives. Beyond the message itself, there are key questions about the messenger, the medium of delivery and the timing, all of which can alter the effectiveness. The use of humour by preachers to deliver their extremist messages had a powerful impact upon the audience, and likewise it could be more effectively used to help individuals effectively understand and engage with new ideas and ridicule extremist ideas as part of debunking them.

4. FORMER EDL MEMBER AND CONVERT TO ISLAM: DAN'S STORY

Dan was born into a multicultural community in Birmingham during the 1980s "and saw the usual racism you would expect to find in such diverse communities". The far-right and National Front had a strong presence, however their activity remained discrete due to the large population of ethnic minorities. Dan belonged to a group of friends who were "a mix of white, usually with an Irish parent, mixed-race and African Caribbean". They were a collection of "skinheads and rude boys" who were "mostly into ska music, reggae and hip-hop". Dan soon moved up to the "causal scene around Birmingham Football Club, who unknowingly had the first multicultural hooligan firm". Dan "had a brief experience in this field" but "soon found himself getting nicked regularly". During this period Dan was anti-racist and would regularly challenge right wing groups who were active in his area.

Upon moving to South-West England in 2006, Dan embarked upon a relationship with a girl called Laura, who had been brought up by her Palestinian step-father from an early age. Upon meeting Laura's step-father, Dan was told, "Accept Islam and convert, and you will be accepted by the family!" After a lot of "umming and arring", Dan contacted an "online Islamic site" where he eventually converted to Islam "down the phone". Dan later realised that he had converted to a "pretty conservative pro-Saudi" form of Islam. Despite this, Dan was still not accepted by Laura's family.

As the relationship developed, Laura confided to Dan that she had been forced to convert to Islam when she was 10, was sent to a mosque where she had been sexually abused, and was

forced into an arranged marriage at 17. These revelations angered Dan, who became furious that Laura had gone through so much pain in the name of religion. Dan also felt guilty for converting to a religion that he knew nothing about. At this time, Dan also became aware of hate preachers and "became very angry and upset that they were allowed to do and say anything about gays, Jews and anyone who didn't fit into their supremacist ideology".

Dan's ability to access this information via the TV and Internet inflated the perceived threat of Islamism, and his sense of grievance and soon Dan became committed to fighting Islamist extremism.

This sparked his interest in the English Defence League (EDL), who were re-emerging in his community. Dan was introduced to the group through an online forum. Dan noticed a few others from his area who also supported the EDL which enabled him to form a division. Together, they regularly attended demonstrations in his area.

This highlights how the Internet is a key component of modern life. The Internet provided Dan with the ability to communicate and collaborate with other like-minded individuals. While offline interactions sparked Dan's interest in the far-right, it was the Internet which acted as a catalyst towards radicalisation.

While Dan became a prominent member of the EDL, he fully endorsed the EDL's spin that the group was only "against political Islam". However soon Dan's bubble burst when the group began to chant "no more mosques, no more halal!" at demonstrations.

After that, Dan began to scale back his activity in the EDL, but maintained "an online presence on what was called the anti-jihadist scene". Together with a few other ex-EDL members, Dan was introduced to an organisation called Nice Ones UK, which had been established by an ex-EDL member. Through this group, Dan became aware of the Quilliam and read the Maajid Nawaz's autobiography '*Radical*'. By reading Maajid Nawaz' life story, Dan realised that the best "way forward [and] the only way to counter extremism is to hit it head-on with a counter-narrative". By educating himself through the work of the Quilliam Foundation, Dan realised that Islam was not the issue; rather, the problem was the "distorted, warped and twisted interpretation called Islamism". It has now become clear to Dan that Islam has been hijacked and distorted by extremists to fit their political agenda. Though still on his journey, this is a positive step in his personal transformation.

5. FORMER ISLAMIST & CONVICTED TERRORIST: JAVED'S STORY

Javed grew up in the West and is a "second-generation" immigrant of "Pakistani ethnicity". Coming from a "well-off family" who provided him with plenty of opportunities, Javed was "very active in his local community". However, during his time at university, Javed was exposed to an extremist Islamist ideology. While Javed's involvement was brief and his interaction with the group was limited, it resulted in Javed being handed an 18 year jail sentence.

At the age of 18, Javed was arrested on terrorism charges for attempting to detonate bombs against three high-profile targets. Javed fully believed that carrying out this attack would liberate Muslims around the world. Subsequent psychiatric reports outlined Javed's naivety and immaturity, which exposed his vulnerability to extremism while at university. Fortunately, with the assistance of "family, friends, certain religious councillors and most importantly education, both secular and religious", Javed was able to turn his back on "political violence and the extremist ideology in all its forms".

Education became key for Javed to "understand the roots of modern Islamist movements" and the "errors in their simplified political and religious arguments". Javed found that "nuanced arguments against the Salafi jihadist movement are far more important than simple condemnations". Through his research, Javed was surprised by the level of improper analysis that was "simplified, misplaced or outright erroneous" and recognises that "many analysts are trying to explain a phenomenon they don't understand". He found that the complexity and multitude of factors which fuelled the problem are often not acknowledged.

Through his research, Javed came across the writings of Dr Usama Hasan, a Senior Researcher at Quilliam and an Imam for over 30 years. Javed found the writings of Usama to be "very coherent and, more importantly, correct in tackling the issues of radicalisation". By recognising the role of identity, religion, culture and community leadership, Javed was able to clarify the factors which had influenced his own thinking and radicalisation. Furthermore, this enabled Javed to understand the flawed arguments which underpinned Islamism.

Through education, Javed became empowered to challenge the roots of modern Islamist movements. This, coupled with strong support from family and friends, helped Javed to turn his back on Islamism. Currently, Javed remains incarcerated for a terrorism-related offence, however he hopes to complete a degree in politics and economics from prison later this year. He hopes to use his experiences to contribute positively to counter-extremism and help others avoid the mistakes that he made earlier in his life.

Critical thinking is the ability to analyse, critique and evaluate evidence in an objective fashion. Advances in technology have made critical thinking skills even more important, yet sometimes more difficult to use. Extremist groups are adept at spreading a propagandised fantasy online and if those vulnerable to extremism do not engage critical thinking skills when consuming such material, they will be unable to distinguish this from reality. This is not exclusive to the internet - during university, Javed was unable to critically engage with the extremist material he was consuming; instead, he accepted it as truth and committed himself to an ideology that was deeply flawed. In this instance, the absence of this skill led to generalisations and dramatic behavioural changes. Javed's belief that detonating bombs would liberate all Muslims

emphasises the naivety of his thinking. Fortunately this did not cost him his life or the lives of other innocent people, but it has had a profoundly negative impact on his life, keeping him in prison for the foreseeable future.

Javed's testimony shows the fundamental role education plays when countering extremism, and the increased risk of radicalisation should education not be comprehensive. The value of this education being both secular and religious is clear. In addition, this testimony emphasises the importance of communicating counter-extremism initiatives coherently and accurately. Simply condemning extremism is not enough, rather it is important that positive measures which proactively challenge the ideology and narratives underpinning extremism are communicated to the vulnerable individuals both offline and online.

Relationships are essential when supporting an individual who is disengaging from extremism, and it is clear from Javed's testimony that his family and friends helped him turn his back on Islamism. Javed's testimony also highlights how perseverance, enthusiasm and empathy are important traits needed to support someone who is disengaging from extremism.

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6. FORMER SUPPORTER OF ANTI-MUSLIM HATRED : LESLIE'S STORY

Leslie used to hold far-right views; however after following the work that Quilliam pursues, Leslie began to moderate his views to adopt a more progressive and inclusive attitude towards Muslims.

Before embarking upon this transition, Leslie found himself possessing "undiluted hostility" and "intolerance" towards Islam. With a degree in international relations, he had a detailed understanding of the politics in the Middle East and Asia. Therefore, Leslie said his aversion towards Islam was not a knee-jerk reaction, but rather a viewpoint that stretched back decades.

Leslie said that a big eye-opener for him was when he followed the work of Quilliam. Realising that the version of Islam being propagated by Islamist extremists was just one particular interpretation, Leslie said he stopped holding divisive views and instead adopted a more inclusive perspective on the religion. Through reading and watching the news, Leslie has sought a more proactive approach. He frequently enjoys engaging with individuals of all religions, including Muslims. He now says that it is important to engage and converse with them. While he may not share the same political or religious views, Leslie believes it is valuable to be open to different perspectives and attitudes.

However, Leslie's transition away from a solely politicised understanding of Islam has not come without its difficulties. The December 2014 attack on a school in the Pakistani city of Peshawar by the Taliban which killed 132 children among the 152 victims, was particularly challenging. Leslie acknowledged his difficulty in comprehending how anyone could justify these

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killings in the name of religion. Nevertheless, Leslie noted that out of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, it is wrong that they should be held accountable for the deeds of extremists who have hijacked Islam to fulfil their own goals.

Leslie said that he moderated his views not because he was told to, but because he came to the conclusion that it is wrong to live a life blinded by misguided hatred. Leslie now believes that it is important for society to educate themselves on the beliefs and attitudes that extremists hold and to understand the differences between Islam and Islamist extremism. Through watching the news and engaging with people of all beliefs, Leslie believes that unfairly negative attitudes towards Islam can be altered.

Leslie's testimony highlights how personal behavioural and ideational change is a complicated and long-term process. Facilitating this process requires a comprehensive strategy and a long-term commitment.

7. FORMER ISLAMIST TURNED SPY: MOHAMMED'S STORY

Living in the West, Mohammed was a violent extremist who had "all sorts of crazy ideas about Jihad this, bomb that". Mohammed's identity was closely bound to an ideology which dictated every aspect of his life. Strict adherence to this ideology caused Mohammed to view all non-Muslims with deep hostility.

However, Mohammed came across Maajid Nawaz' story and it prompted him to re-think his own commitment to the Islamist cause. Soon Mohammed began to see the error in the political and religious arguments championed by his peers and thereafter, Mohammed left the extremist group.

When Mohammed deradicalised, he committed himself to combating the "violent, deviant, criminal ideology", which "Maajid spoke so fairly and forcefully against." This encouraged him to become a counter-terrorism operative, where he largely focused on countering domestic and home-grown terrorism. Oftentimes Mohammed would be embedded undercover within a suspected terrorist organisation. This insight enabled Mohammed to gain an understanding of the socio-political factors which created the conditions for or, on occasion, sparked radicalisation. It also highlighted to Mohammed that many extremists "generally have sympathies towards" these groups, with many members having an "idealistic or naive understanding of the threat".

Thus, Mohammed understood that it was the ideology that underpinned the jihadist narrative which needed to be countered through communicating positive counter-narratives like Maajid's story. Mohammed believes that positive measures,

rather than negative state-led measures, are needed to undermine the jihadist ideology.

Today Mohammed continues to "train with and consult for various security, intelligence, and policing units". His commitment to preventing extremism remains as strong as ever.

This testimony emphasises how powerful personal narratives are when countering extremism. Maajid Nawaz' journey from being a high-ranking official of a global Islamist group, to a leading voice in countering extremism is a powerful message of hope for extremists, who may be experiencing their own disenfranchisement with their group, leaders, cause or ideology. It was Maajid's story which promoted Mohammed to rethink his own commitment to the cause and eventually encouraged him to renounce Islamist extremism.

This testimony highlights the positive role former extremists can have when tackling extremism. Mohammed's active involvement in terrorism enabled him to understand the social and political factors which underpin extremism. When he renounced his extremist views, Mohammed was able to use his knowledge when he became a counter-terrorism operative. This highlights the positive impact former extremists can have when tackling extremism and radicalisation.

8. FORMER FAR-RIGHT NOW INSPIRED BY EDUCATION: MATTHEW'S STORY

Matthew never actively belonged to an extremist organisation, yet for much of his life he held strong right-wing views. Such views were heightened when he watched "idiots like Anjem Choudary" on the television. Matthew also says that he was also disgruntled by the number of women wearing niqabs in the United Kingdom. He believed it segregated them from non-Muslims, prevented integration, and was an insult to British culture. Revelations which emerged during the Rotherham child sexual abuse scandal fuelled Matthew's animosity towards Muslim communities. Instead of condemning the perpetrators of the crime, because of their religion, he blamed all Muslims as it fit his worldview that Islam was anti-British.

One day, Matthew stumbled upon a video of Maajid Nawaz and Anjem Choudary debating on TV and it helped to change Matthew's point of view. For the first time, Matthew found himself listening to an individual who was able to "destroy" the foundations of Islamism. This enabled Matthew to understand the difference between Islam and Islamism.

Soon Matthew realised that extremists who "claim to talk on behalf of the Muslim communities and Islam" were hijacking the religion to fulfil their own political goals.

Recently, Matthew has renounced his right-wing views, though it is clear that some challenges still remain.

Matthew remains angered at the apparent "lack of will from the government to tackle the problem head on". In Matthew's opinion, a policy which tackles the root cause of the ideology needs to be developed.   This testimony highlights the growing

frustration towards the British government for failing to tackle Islamist extremism. There is a tendency of the government to criminalise extremism, instead of tackling the ideology which underpins extremism. This approach is not only ineffective, it is often counter-productive. As highlighted in this testimony, a strategy which counters the ideas enshrined in extremist ideologies needs to be implemented.

Matthew also believes that some Muslim voices need to be given more prominence to show that Islam does not constitute Islamism. Too often, the most extreme voices are heard the most, yet we very rarely hear from women, young people or minorities within minorities who also have valuable contributions to this debate and others.

Today Matthew donates much of his time educating others on the difference between Islam and Islamist extremism. It is Matthew's dream to create a programme which establishes a link between Muslims and Islamist extremists, with the hope that extremists can be educated, deradicalised, rehabilitated and reintegrated into British society.

9. FORMER SENIOR ISLAMIST RECRUITER: AAMIR'S STORY

Aamir described himself as a "fanatic who desperately needed to believe in a cause". When he was younger, Aamir positioned himself on the "national leadership committee of a prominent Islamist organisation". Aamir's dedication to the group and its ideology was "driven by a sheer hatred of the policies produced and enforced by Muslim rulers in collusion with Western powers". Belief or religion was never a driving factor; rather, Aamir's "desire to spread the word of Islam was motivated by [a] political purpose".

Like all Islamists, Aamir wanted "to create a paradise on earth; a global Islamic State", in which *Shari'a* was enforced upon all its occupants. Aamir vehemently rejected alternative views and was infuriated by those who challenged his ideology. By remaining within a close-knit group, it enabled Aamir to reinforce these beliefs, free from criticism or any checks and balances to his dogma.

However, the degree of manipulation which was used to recruit individuals caused Aamir to become disillusioned with the organisation. Aamir became aware that "the cause itself was never sufficient to entice people into joining the organisation".

This was enough for Aamir to research alternative views, including American-born preacher Hamza Yusuf. This broadened Aamir's horizons and it allowed him to appreciate the plurality of opinions within Islamic thought.

Despite all of this Aamir stayed within the organisation, predominately due to his desperate desire to belong to a cause. He had structured every aspect of his life on Islamism, to the extent that it became difficult for him to "completely reject

Islamism from [his] mind". Ultimately Aamir knew that by rejecting this ideology, it would compromise his whole identity.

However, soon Aamir became reacquainted with Maajid Nawaz, Quilliam's Chairman. Maajid engaged in an "informed and deeply grounded discussion" about Aamir's beliefs and fears. By deconstructing the foundations of Islamism, Maajid enabled Aamir to understand what he now sees as "the true teachings of Islam". Aamir was pleasantly surprised that "someone who had little reason to do so, took the time and effort to talk" to him, to allow him "to express [his] own beliefs before "carefully and cleverly offering [him] alternatives, instead of immediately labelling [him] as a lost cause".

Aamir began to think systematically and deeply about Islam and Muslims in a multi-faith world. This enabled Aamir to address the challenges of post-modernity and ultimately overcome the obstacles he faced. This empowered Aamir to disengage with the organisation and the negative ideological influences which had given birth to his identity. Aamir found this particularly difficult, as every aspect of his life was connected to Islamism. However, recognising that Maajid had faced a similar situation and prevailed, gave Aamir the strength to fully renounce his views and reform his life.

Today Aamir continues to champion Islam; however, his commitment is now based on faith instead of a politically motivated ideology. Aamir continues to engage with individuals of varying beliefs and religions, which enables him to feel more enriched as a human being. Aamir acknowledges that Maajid Nawaz and Quilliam have been crucial assets to his life and are needed in the global struggle against extremism of all kinds.

This testimony highlights the importance of freedom of speech. In his engagement with Maajid, Aamir was able to express his own beliefs instead of being rebuked or condemned. This was in direct contrast to the way in which debate was shut down during his time within an extremist organisation. Maajid listened, understood and offered an alternative understanding of Islam which impressed Aamir and sparked further enquiry. This emphasises the link between freedom of expression and personal dignity. Freedom of speech is key to the development of an individual and freely exchanging ideas enables members of society to feel more secure and respected. Thus, they will be more open to a range of ideas and experiences, allowing them to gain a better understanding of the world and their role in it, and supporting ideals of citizenship and shared identity.

It is evident that belonging to a prominent Islamist group was a great source of pride and self-esteem for Aamir. It provided Aamir with a sense of belonging in an increasingly globalised and cosmetic world. While in the organisation, Aamir enhanced the status of the 'in-group' to increase his self-image. This encouraged Aamir to engage in discriminatory behaviour towards the 'out-group', as this strengthened his identity and sense of self-worth. This highlights how identity and self-esteem can be powerful pull factors which encourage membership to extremist organisations.

10. FORMER EDL KEYBOARD WARRIOR: NIGEL'S STORY

Nigel grew up in a small town on the English side of the Welsh border. In a relatively isolated community, Nigel had "no exposure to people from other racial backgrounds". However, Nigel moved to Cardiff where he "experienced racism first hand". Nigel was "taunted for the colour of his skin" and "religion" by "Somalis and Asians". Furthermore, "Welsh natives" also made Nigel feel as though he did not belong in Cardiff because he was from England. During this time, there were heightened fears that the traditional rivalry between Wales and England was turning into institutionalised anti-English sentiment.

This relative isolation from different races, religion and cultures played a role in Nigel's radicalisation process. The lack of education on different races and religions prevented Nigel from being able to differentiate between race and religion, or between legitimate religious beliefs and politicised ideology. Therefore, Nigel conflated Islam and Islamism. The failure to segregate race and religion enables extremists to view individuals of different religions as a collective entity. Extremists use this to inflate perceived threats which fuel their animosity towards the West and further entrench their worldview.

These hostilities caused Nigel to withdraw from his local community to find answers on the Internet. By stumbling upon conspiratorial websites, Nigel began to "read on the Internet about race issues and about the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7". Soon Nigel began to view Islam as a "destructive force" that was "responsible for all the world's problems". Nigel began to hold divisive and bigoted views of Islam and ethnic minorities.

This testimony highlights how the absence of critical thinking skills was a factor which failed to prevent Nigel's radicalisation to far-right extremism. Nigel was unable to differentiate between race and religion and viewed everyone who fit his stereotype as a Muslim. Critical thinking enables individuals to generate and critique arguments, which is fundamental to the decision-making process. The absence of these skills led Nigel to misinterpret reality and inflated his sense of threat, which ultimately fuelled his extremism.

Following this, Nigel joined the English Defence League (EDL), however his activity was restricted to the Internet. Nigel became a "keyboard warrior" and "complained about the influence of Muslims on British society". Nigel ensured his views were widely circulated, to the extent that he was reported to police for inciting racial and religious hatred.

By only accessing sites which hosted divisive and extremist content, Nigel created an echo chamber for himself and unwittingly used the Internet as a platform to become radicalised and radicalise others. This highlights how modern communication offers unprecedented access to information, emphasising how trends and patterns of radicalisation have evolved. This is consistent with previous research, which states that radicalisation is usually sparked through offline socialisation processes but can continue online if unchecked.

Becoming a member of the EDL enabled Nigel to justify his own beliefs by furthering a sense of "them vs us". It enabled Nigel to create an identity for himself and an online community which was accepting of him and to which he belonged. In this way, identity crisis and discrimination set the conditions for Nigel's radicalisation, and were exploited by an extremist organisation

that offered 'solutions' to his perceived personal grievances. The EDL highlighted the 'in-group' and 'out-group' mentality that he had already formed in his mind, and together are factors which fuelled Nigel's radicalisation process.

By restricting his membership to the Internet, it created an element of detachment and enabled Nigel to disassociate himself from his offline persona. Moreover, as is typical in online extremism, the anonymous nature of Nigel's online identity meant that his behaviour was more extreme than it would have in the offline world. Nigel's beliefs were reaffirmed by a community of people who shared his beliefs, creating a type of online echo chamber. This is also consistent with the phenomenon of the participatory Internet. Nigel's experience shows how, without positive counter-narratives, the Internet can be used to further self-radicalisation.

However, within Nigel's testimony, we also see the positive role of the internet. One night Nigel was "browsing the web, looking for websites and information against Islam", he stumbled across a video on Twitter of a debate between Quilliam's Chairman, Maajid Nawaz, and hate preacher Anjem Choudary on Newsnight. Nigel was "mesmerised by how Maajid beat Anjem down". However, what was most impressive for Nigel was Maajid's counter-narrative of peace and tolerance. Nigel "thought Maajid was a fantastic speaker and started researching his work". Nigel read Maajid's book *Radical* and began to learn more about "peaceful Islam and tolerance".

This coincided with Nigel questioning his future with the EDL. Nigel realised that many members of the group did not want to find solutions, but were drawn to the aggressive nature of the movement and he soon left.

QUILLIAM

Shortly after leaving the group, many of Nigel's friends began to shun him on social media. However Nigel realised that his friendships which had been formed during his time in the EDL were based on hate. This realisation enabled Nigel to finally let go of the prejudices which had dictated his relationship with other religions, races and cultures. Most importantly, this also enabled Nigel to forgive himself.

Today Nigel continues to follow Quilliam's work and champion the ideals of tolerance and respect. Nigel recognises that while we may come from different religions, cultures and races, we are all human beings.

TESTIMONY ANALYSIS

SHAME, GUILT & IDENTITY CRISIS

Through analysis of these testimonies, it is clear that the cause of these individuals' extremist behaviour stems from their attempt to eliminate the overwhelming feeling of shame and humiliation, and replacing that with a feeling of pride. Usually there is a genuine or perceived grievance involved, which lends itself to the push and pull of isolation and lack of belonging.

Dan was primarily motivated to join the EDL to overcome his sense of guilt. As stated in his testimony, Dan was enraged when he realised how badly his partner had been treated by those who acted in the name of religion. Dan felt as though he had condoned this treatment by converting to Islam, despite lacking any theological understanding of the religion. Thus, membership to the EDL permitted Dan to pursue retribution for those he viewed as responsible for Laura's mistreatment. By engaging in this aggressive behavior, he diminished his sense of guilt and replaced it with a feeling of pride.

It is equally conceivable that Dan was attempting to reduce his own sense of shame. It is evident that Dan converted to Islam to gain acceptance by Laura's family; however, upon conversion to Islam, Dan failed to gain acceptance by Laura's family. As is clear in most radicalisation models, identity crisis and grievances both real and perceived, can create the breeding ground for a number of psychological consequences, including insecurity and aggression. This can trigger radicalisation and recruitment to extremist organisations. This form of social exclusion generated

feelings of shame and anger which potentially triggered Dan's interest in the EDL.

When Abdul was unable to protect himself from thugs who were targeting Asians, he turned to Al-Muhajiroun to provide him with protection. Abdul stated that the power commanded by the group attracted him to the organisation. By joining this group, Abdul no longer felt vulnerability; instead these feelings were replaced with pride. As vulnerability is intrinsically linked with shame, it is evident that membership to Al-Muhajiroun gave Abdul a sense of control and reduced his feeling of shame. In this way, Abdul's identity crisis was exploited by Al-Muhajiroun and ultimately sparked Abdul's radicalisation.

Similarly, Sohail was deeply confused and ashamed of his sexuality, which had haunted him since he was a child. He openly admits to using Islamism to "cure" his homosexuality. Believing that homosexuality was classed as evil under his interpretation of Islam, it encouraged Sohail to further immerse himself in Islamism, in an effort to establish a new identity and eliminate feelings of shame and guilt.

By contrast, Nigel was encouraged to join the EDL to foster a sense of belonging. Upon moving to Wales, Nigel was subjected to discrimination for his English heritage. This fostered a sense of vulnerability for Nigel during a period of transition. The fact that Nigel was discriminated against by a range of religious and ethnic groups, yet chose to target Muslims, indicates that he was primarily encouraged to join the EDL to foster a sense of belonging, and not simply to retaliate against those who had directly discriminated against him. In other words, strengthening a group identity minimized his exclusion from a larger collective identity. Nigel's experience also shows that

grievances need not be real to make someone vulnerable; perceived grievances can be exploited just as effectively by extremist groups who seek to further their cause.

It is evident that a range of factors contribute towards radicalisation. However, it is also clear that cognitive and emotional behaviour have a significant impact on this process. Events which induce feelings of shame, guilt and vulnerability often become the catalyst for radicalisation. Often these events take place during times of transition where an identity crisis enhances susceptibility to extremism. Supporting people through times of transitions through outreach programmes in schools, universities and local communities can contribute towards healthy behaviours and develop more supportive and cohesive communities. Developing personal resilience can also enable society to deal with the difficulties and adversaries they encounter, leaving them less susceptible to extremism. By addressing real and perceived grievances through a liberal, secular, democratic lens - we can reduce the perceived value of Islamist and far-right extremist organisations addressing these grievances through their misguided extremist lens.

DISCRIMINATION AS A GRIEVANCE

Discrimination is central to the experiences of those who have provided testimonies for this report; however it is clear that what discrimination actually looks like in society today has shifted, albeit superficially.

Former far-right participants in this report commented that their hostility was directed towards Islam and not the colour of the individual's skin. This indicates that there is a growing trend

of anti-Muslim hatred within contemporary society. Hostility towards Muslims is problematic because it goes against universal human rights, such as freedom of religion, and exacerbates the exclusion of Muslims from society. Failure of some Muslim communities to integrate in British society in turn lays the foundation for more radicalisation, and is a grievance which is manipulated by extremist organisations.

This report also indicates that some factions of society are unable to distinguish between race and religion, which is distorting their sense of grievance. Former far-right participants openly acknowledged that they were unable to distinguish between race and religion, and so branded everyone who fit their stereotype as the antagonist. This inflated the participants' sense of grievance.

This falls in line with a YouGov poll which showed that Islam was viewed as a negative influence on British society, with 55% of respondents believing that there was a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society[13]. This could show that anti-Muslim hatred is a growing trend in British society, and it also shows the failure to promote an interpretation of Islam that is consistent with British values and human rights norms. Islamist and far right extremists agree that Islam is incompatible with British values, revealing the negative symbiotic relationship between these extremisms and showing the urgent need to tackle them both simultaneously.

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[13] Rogers, Dr 'YouGov | The Majority Of Voters Doubt That Islam Is Compatible With British Values'. YouGov: What the world thinks. N.p., 2015. Web. 24 July 2015. (https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/03/30/majority-voters-doubt-islam-compatible-british-val/)

POSITIVE & NEGATIVE ROLE OF THE INTERNET

The Internet, as discussed in *Jihad Trending*, is the latest vehicle for radicalisation. Rather than presenting a wholly new phenomenon, online radicalisation merely complements offline processes and very often presents the "path of least resistance" for the transmission and reception of extremist material. Extremist organisations have become very effective at exploiting the anonymity that the Internet provides, the ability of likeminded but geographically-distant individuals to share ideas and opinions, and producing persuasive content to radicalise and recruit vulnerable populations to their cause. It is evident that the Internet and the availability of extremist material online has diversified the process of radicalisation, even if it has not wholly changed it. Social media sites which host videos and images can be powerful when reinforcing a particular set of beliefs. However, the majority of testimonies in this report indicated that their radicalisation was initially sparked through offline socialisation processes. This reinforces the idea that no one goes online to buy a pair of shoes and comes out an extremist. Most individuals have a particular grievance, identity crisis, or preconditioning towards a set of ideas, which leads them to seek out extremist content online.

Most participants used the Internet to communicate and / or reinforce a particular set of beliefs. By using the Internet as a mode of communication, it encouraged a number of participants to engage in risky or threatening behaviour online. The anonymous nature of the Internet creates an element of detachment which lowers the threshold for engaging in negative behaviour online. This is often exploited by extremists to disseminate extremist messages to a wider audience.

These testimonies also emphasise the positive role the Internet can have on deradicalisation. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube appeared as important sites used by participants to source or stumble across counter-narratives. Clearer and more accessible information about extremism and radicalisation, including online, would provide a much needed counter-balance to the effectiveness of extremist groups on the Internet. All participants came across counter-narratives to their previously held extremist views and many of them did so online. Had there been more counter-narratives that were more nuanced, more targeted, more accessible, or more varied, this deradicalisation process could have been sped up, and more people could become engaged in the process. Part of this is using social media platforms as effectively as extremist groups to disseminate counter-messaging to their ideology and narratives.

DELIVERING COUNTER-NARRATIVES

The testimonies in this report reinforce the importance of counter-speech and positive measures to tackle all forms of extremism. However, different elements of these counter-narratives were more influential for different individuals. Some of the former far-right extremists highlighted that it was the coherent delivery of these counter-narratives which proved most influential - the messenger's language and appearance, and the vehicle were of central importance. By contrast, it was the content of the counter-narratives and its ability to undermine the theological foundations of the Islamist ideology and worldview, which proved most influential for former Islamists in this study. This shows that the construction of

counter-speech initiatives must consider the message, the messenger and the mode, and should be targeted towards its target audience to be most effective. The credibility of the messenger in the eyes of the target audience is also important, and it is broadly accepted in counter-extremism that official, government-led counter-narrative content is ineffective. Therefore, it is preferable if counter-speech initiatives are led by civil society, and the role of government is limited to setting the strategic direction of counter-extremism work by choosing partners or funding grassroots initiatives, rather than producing the work itself.

It is also evident that positive measures should be multi-layered and accessible online. Many participants stated that viewing specific videos online prompted them to conduct more in-depth research into the work Quilliam carries out. This indicates that videos and imagery remain powerful tools which can be used to counter extremism in the first instance; however, this content, which might spark a cognitive opening, should be used alongside more in-depth content that is easily accessible from the primary content. In short, different counter-messaging material will be important at different stages of the deradicalisation process.

CRITICAL THINKING

This report shows that an absence of critical thinking skills may increase vulnerability to radicalisation. Many participants acknowledged that they were unable to critically engage with the underlying arguments which supported the extremist narrative to which they subscribed. They were able to endorse and regurgitate the information, yet could not challenge the

arguments put forward. This shows that education can be a powerful tool to prevent extremism and radicalisation but must be broader than the traditional curriculum. It must focus on free and independent thinking, which encourages students to critically engage with material and not just memorise. This will encourage students to rationalise their thinking and see the consequences to their decisions and actions. In this way, it will leave them less vulnerable to radicalisation and exploitation. Moreover, a greater understanding among young people of the differences between Islam and Islamism will help prevent radicalisation, as this common misconception was a shared theme among far-right and Islamist extremists. This, along with the plurality of interpretations within Islam, should be taught in religious education classes and is a powerful primary prevention tool.

CONCLUSION

The rise of the far-right across Europe and the steady normalisation of far-right ideology presents a significant social threat to community cohesion. When this is coupled with the threat we face from growing trends in Islamist radicalisation and the normalisation of that ideology, as well as the prescient and often violent threat that its adherents pose, it is clear that more research needs to be conducted to develop a comprehensive deradicalisation strategy to turn the tide from these trends. The similarities between the deradicalisation of far-right extremists and their far-right counterparts should guide us the development of clear, comprehensive and consistent strategies to counter extremism of all kinds, both in prevention and deradicalisation.

The tactics and strategies used to deradicalise extremists can only work if practitioners can identify the weaknesses and challenges which accompany the deradicalisation process. As highlighted in this report, cognitive and emotional behaviour have a significant impact on the decision-making process for extremists and should be recognised and adopted into future counter-extremism strategies. Academic research into this process must be coupled with further engagement with former extremists to understand their personal development, disengagement, deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration. Acknowledging that this is a human process will allow us to develop strategies that are broad enough to be used comprehensively, yet with the freedom to target them towards individual human cases.

Engaging and inspiring audiences by harnessing the positive role of the Internet, to effectively deliver targeted counter-extremist

narratives is a powerful way to undermine extremism and radicalisation. The last 10 years has seen the development of preventative and responsive counter-extremism work to "win hearts and minds" but has not overwhelmingly been seen as an issue of messaging. Future efforts will prove futile if we do not develop skills such as critical thinking and digital literacy capabilities to enhance resilience and reduce vulnerability, alongside such recommended counter-messaging efforts to tackle the prominence of extremist groups and their effectiveness.

Overcoming the problems we face today by adopting the changes recommended in this report cannot be achieved overnight. It is clear that a coordinated effort which has the support and expertise from all civic, government, and private sectors is fundamental to the creation of a sustainable programme which puts society on the path towards peace and tolerance.

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