YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRAJECTORIES THROUGH 'ISLAMIST' MILIEUS

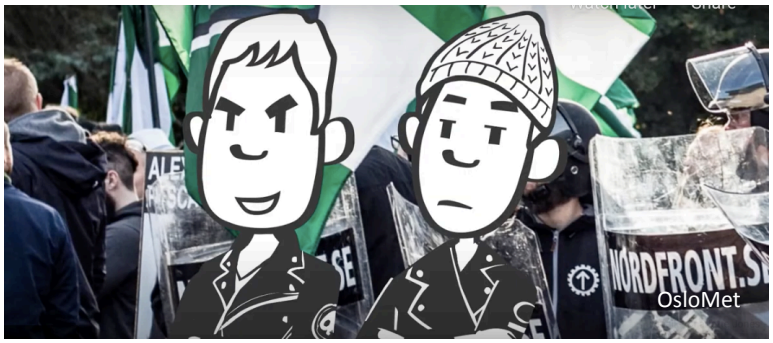
Summary of Key Findings

- Adopting a milieu approach enables the examination of individual trajectories towards and away from extremism and the identification of factors that both facilitate and constrain radicalisation.
- The search for identity is an important aspect of respondents' trajectories often described as intrinsically linked to the experience of individual and collective discriminatory and anti-Muslim messaging.
- These experiences relate to: the framing of Muslims and Islam as 'radical' or 'extreme' in public discourse; feelings of social rejection and persecution at home; and collective experience of discrimination, humiliation and injustice in relation to the global Muslim community.
- 'Radicalisation' and 'extremism' are understood by milieu actors as intrinsically relational constructs, that is that individuals, groups or behaviours are 'radical' or 'extremist' when labelled as such by those with the power to do so. This leads respondents to dissociate from this labelling process and construct their own thresholds of what is acceptable and what is 'too extreme'.
- Relational dynamics – interactions with others – are an important factor in both *facilitating* and *constraining* radicalisation. This study found social ties, networks and identification with neighbourhoods and 'scenes' as important factors in re-rooting research participants and leading them away from extremism.

The DARE Research

This research briefing is based on qualitative data collected as part of the DARE (Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality) project. The project focuses on young people (loosely defined as those aged 15 to 30 years) and on two strands of extremism, which we refer to as 'Islamist' extremism (ISE) and 'right-wing' extremism (RWE).

The DARE project uses a mixed-methods approach and has multiple research strands. In this research briefing, data are drawn from 10 milieu-based ethnographic case studies of young people's trajectories through radical(ising) milieus in Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Norway, The Netherlands, Russia, Tunisia, Turkey and the UK. In total 185 young people took part and 199 semi-structured interviews were recorded.



We cannot do justice to the complexity and contentious nature of many terms used in this briefing. For brief conceptual definitions, see: http://www.dare-h2020.org/concepts.html. For critical discussion and contextualisation of these terms, please consult the individual research reports: http://www.dare-h2020.org/research-reports.html

Further information on the project and participating institutions can be found at the end of this briefing.

Introduction

In this study, we understand trajectories as individual pathways shaped by intersecting structural, group and individual factors. This briefing explores trajectories through 'Islamist' milieus that lead individuals towards extremist attitudes or behaviours but also to partial or stalled radicalisation, non-radicalisation and de-radicalisation.

Describing these milieus as '*Islamist*', we refer to a range of ideological positions rooted in the interaction between Islam and politics and distinguish this from '*Islamic*', understood as relating to Islam as a body of religious thought. 'Islamism' is employed here to indicate a conviction that Islam should be a guiding force in political, societal, and personal life, which expands religious observance of Islam into an ideological expression of the religion. *Islamist radicalisation* indicates the process whereby an individual, small group, or larger collective moves towards an Islamist position, with a willingness to adopt an extreme stance vis-à-vis what are considered to be political and ideological adversaries. '*Radical Islam'* is an umbrella term indicating a wide range of interpretations and ideological expressions of 'extreme' or 'radical' values, beliefs and behaviours. All these terms are deeply contested, not least by research participants in this study (as discussed below).

The DARE project understands a radical(ising) milieu as an evolving relational and emotional field of activity through which collective identities and solidarities are constructed (Malthaner and Waldmann, 2014: 983). Such milieus can be religious, ethnic or political and form the supportive and sustaining social 'environments' for clandestine activity and the circulation of narratives of grievance and rejected knowledge (Malthaner, 2017: 389). Whilst informed by ecological models of extremism, which focus on 'extremism-enabling settings' (Bouhana, 2019: 17), DARE's focus is on individuals' trajectories through such settings and the role of the reflexive capacity and agency of actors as they experience and respond to encounters with radical(ising) messages. We understand radical milieus as not only sites of radicalisation but social environments in which individuals criticise, challenge or confront the messages encountered there (Malthaner and Waldmann, 2014: 994) and young people's trajectories as evolving through the process of milieu navigation and negotiation of the relationships within it. This includes pathways of 'non-radicalisation' (Cragin, 2014; Cragin et al., 2015). Indeed, in the case studies selected for study, while research participants were actively engaged in radical(ising) milieus, most had not crossed the threshold into violence.

The process, and criteria for selection of the milieus for study is outlined in the Introduction to the individual case reports (see: Dechesne and Pilkington, 2021) and the milieus themselves are discussed in detail in the country based reports (see: https://www.dare-h2020.org/resources.html). These milieus can be broadly grouped into two types (see Figure 1).

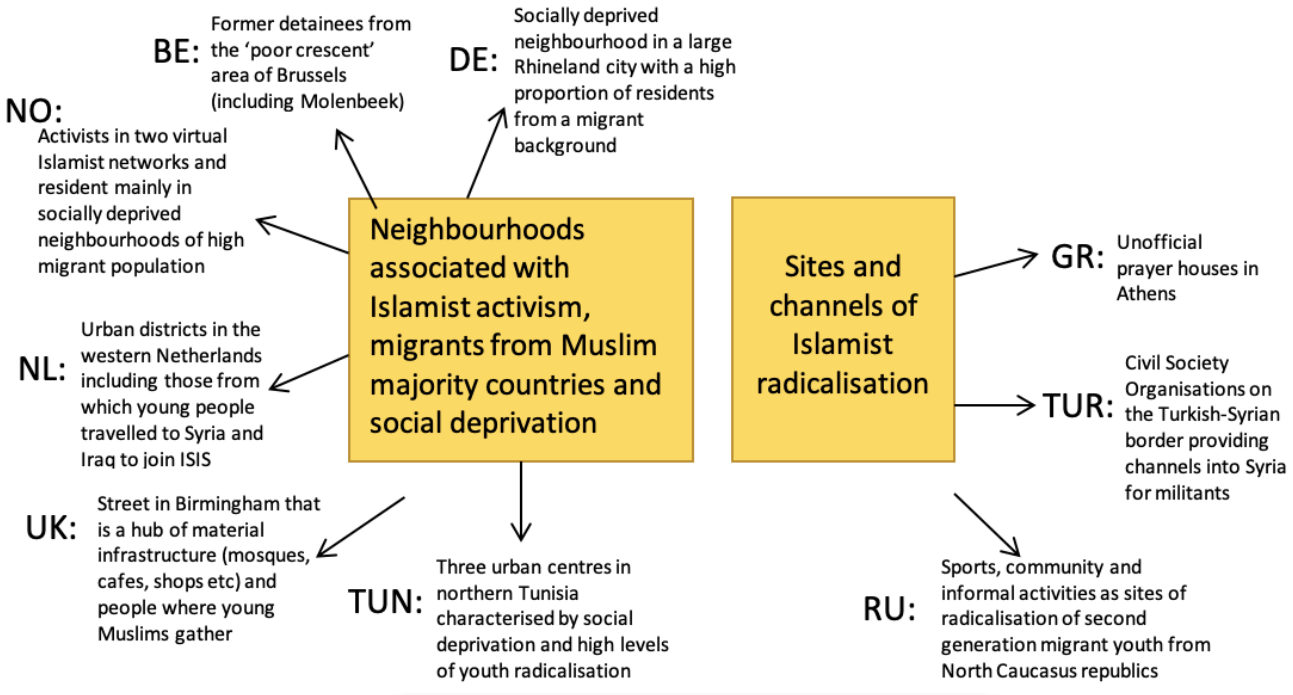


Figure 1: Overview of milieus studied

In this research briefing we outline key factors in trajectories towards extremism emerging from the narratives of research participants; these are loosely framed as identity-based conflicts and tensions. We then consider how 'radicalisation' and 'extremism' are understood by milieu actors as intrinsically relational constructs. On the one hand, this understanding that individuals, groups or behaviours are 'radical' or 'extremist' when labelled as such by others allows respondents to dissociate from this labelling process and construct their own thresholds of what is acceptable and what is 'too extreme'. On the other, it indicates that relational dynamics – interactions with others – are an important factor in both *facilitating* and *constraining* radicalisation.

Identity-based conflicts in trajectories towards and away from extremism

Identity-based conflicts featured strongly in the narratives of respondents in ISE milieus and were experienced as personal and collective.

For some young people, the search for identity intensified as a result of traumatic life events and is described as critical in the understanding their trajectories. German and Dutch respondents in particular talked about personal challenges and crises, often linked to family life, that had led to a need for political and/or spiritual orientation and finding a way to feel at ease. Dutch Respondents 1 and 8 recall their experiences of familial breakups and traumas that led them to embrace Islam. Respondents 2 and 3 recounted how near fatal experiences spurred their interest in Islam. Samira (Germany) said she joined a neo-Salafist group '*Because I just had no other community, because otherwise I would have gone completely crazy, with my parents*.' Ben (Germany) believed felt that his conversion to Islam, after falling in love with a neo-Salafist woman whilst studying abroad, had help him overcome psychological issues he had suffered growing up. Adolescents who experience both personal life traumas and a lack of spiritual orientation may be less likely to resist radical or extremist messaging that appears to offer them what has been missing in their lives.

Respondents described their radicalisation trajectories as being intrinsically linked to the experience of individual and collective discriminatory and anti-Muslim messaging (see Figure 2).

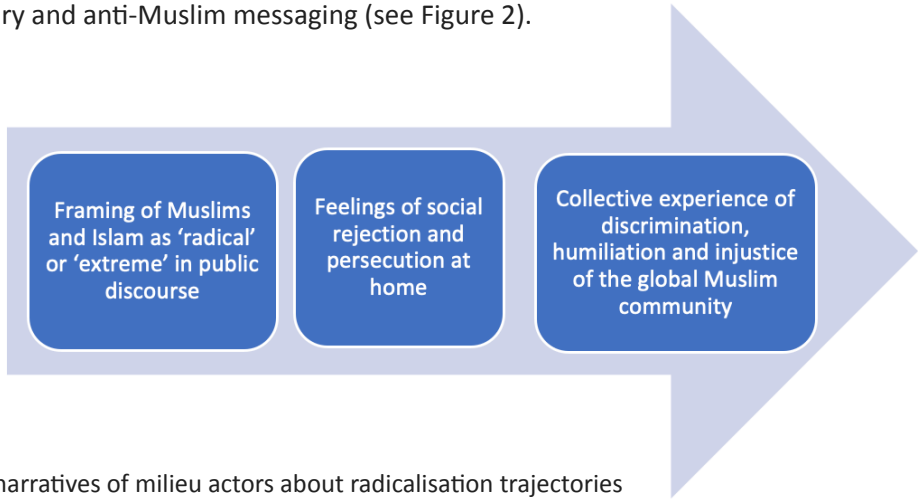


Figure 2: Key themes in narratives of milieu actors about radicalisation trajectories

The framing of Muslims and Islam as 'radical' or 'extreme' in public discourse

Respondents frequently discussed the negative framing of Muslims and Islam by the media and other state institutions. The labels of 'radical' and 'extremist' are viewed as intentionally constructed by media, the state and anti-Islamic factions out of animosity towards Muslims as well as to advance their own financial or political interests. Media is assumed to play a key role in the perpetuation of the image of Muslims as violence-prone and seeking to disrupt society.

JAMIL (GERMANY)

'No matter how serious the news appears, I no longer believe anything. It can turn out to be pure fiction or commissioned by someone, "Here's $50,000 or whatever and you march into a church with a fake beard and shoot 50 people, so that the image of Islam is lost." That's what I believe.'

Respondents lament that media portrayals help to shape the image that the outward appearance of Muslims (e.g. a beard, not shaking hands, a *niqab*) is an expression of radicalism, and thereby spread fear of Muslims in society. In this way, respondents see labels deployed in the media as legitimising heavily curated and biased understandings of radicalisation and extremism in relation to Islam and Muslims.

ADAM (RUSSIA)

'On TV, we are always bad. And those who talk about 'radicals', they should know better - these are authorities who use the term. To give an example, a man was caught and called a radical even though he was not involved in anything. [He was] a simple Muslim who bought a book and this book turned out to be for terrorists. […] It's a slander, a lie. That's what is said on TV, although if you talk to the person, I've talked to him, and he said to me, "Brother, I had nothing to do with it." […] But he is called radical, a terrorist. That's not right. That's oppression.'

GRIEZMANN (FRANCE)

'Since they always called me 'dirty Arab' and all that, I didn't think of myself as French anymore. You know, I figure I'm in France, I was born in France, I'm French and they treat me like a foreigner.'

Wider public debate surrounding ethnicity, Islam and being a Muslim have complicated identity development among young Muslims. Young Muslims in France often struggle with a 'double absence' (Sayad, 1999) – the feeling of being neither French nor from the country of their parents. In this context, Islam may appear as a 'refuge', a new identity and/or a means of subjectivation (Khosrokhavar, 1997; Göle, 1995; Roy, 2004). Griezmann (France) articulates this experience of 'double absence'.

Social rejection and a sense of persecution at home

A sense of rejection, sometimes persecution, is frequently reported by respondents living in the non-Muslim majority countries of study and creates a feeling of social isolation. Osman (Norway) encapsulates the widespread feeling among respondents in such countries that an 'us' versus 'them' has been created by state institutions, the media and general public discourse. This discourse pits Muslims and Islam against mainstream society, thereby creating a conflictual political and social dynamic and contributing towards a sense of persecution, feelings of isolation and 'uprootedness'.

Dutch R8 reflects on this and describes how the feelings of uprootedness from his identity as Dutch compelled him to search for his Muslim identity as a means to re-root himself.

OSMAN (NORWAY)

'[…] the thing is that they place so much focus, indirectly, on Islamic elements…I feel that it's a problem because people can't be themselves. People are slowly but surely attacking Islam. Because they're not talking about prohibiting the kippa, they're not talking about forbidding the turban. Usually it's about hijabs in the police, hijabs for children. And again, it's the media playing on that and the politicians fall into the trap. I feel that this is negative too because it will lead to people saying: 'You know what? We don't want to have you here in this country.' It's a bit like when Trump decided to have that travel ban on different countries and then people still voted for Trump anyway and a lot of his policies played with this business of racism and exploited racism and hostility towards Muslims.'

R8 (THE NETHERLANDS)

'I started to wonder more and more about who I was. Am I Dutch? Am I Moroccan? I also had a best friend. He would ask questions about, say, nationality, etc. About being a Moroccan, when I wasn't really thinking about that. [...] And then a very important event happened. For many people, this was a turning point. The World Trade Centre. The attack in America. I no longer felt like the Dutch. I was no longer seen as Dutch. I was no longer addressed as a Dutchman. I was suddenly 'the Muslim'. […] And my own best friend also began to distrust me. And to ask, 'How do you feel about it? Do you believe that too?' When he asked me those questions, yeah, that was kind of like a sign of mistrust. I also distanced myself from him. […] Then I started to study Islam, which I had never done before. I was just a social guy who went along with society and made a contribution. But yes, when I was approached as a Muslim, I wanted to know what my background was. And then of course you start looking for your background.'

For Evgenia (Greece) a sense of rejection was experienced among her immediate circle following her conversion to Islam. She recounts how family members called her a *Turkosporos* (meaning 'A Turkish Seed' and connoting someone of shameful, Turkish, origin) and a jihadist. She also recalls them insulting her when they saw her wearing a headscarf. Evgenia understands why some Muslims respond by joining extremist groups and suggested that defensive violence, such as fighting against a foreign invasion (e.g. the US in Iraq), could be justified.

For many respondents, the process of re-rooting is facilitated by immersion into internet fora, which, in the absence of a supportive social and religious environment, becomes the primary resource in their search for identity. With the exception of the Turkish milieu studied, we found the internet and social media to be a key point of access to networks of likeminded others and to contribute directly towards radicalisation. The internet and social media provided the opportunity for individuals to search for religious content, to have direct communication with recruiters for the Islamist cause (often facilitating in-person connections) and to make small contributions to the cause (e.g. sharing content).

The adoption of a radical religious identity was described by respondents as a key outcome of their search for identity and as a means to redress the relational inequality, humiliation and injustices they had experienced. For some respondents this entailed a strengthening of pre-existing faith while, for others, it involved a religious conversion. Whilst no single type of injustice or humiliation on its own appears as a direct cause of radicalisation, the continued confrontation with various relational inequalities and injustices can lead to the accumulation of frustration and angst that one is controlled by malevolent authorities at various levels. Exposure to radical Islamist narratives may bring about a 'cathartic', purifying experience in which one's own conflictual relations become framed as part of a global struggle between 'true Islam' and the unbelievers and a way to make a meaningful contribution in this struggle is revealed.

French respondents Adrian and Romain illustrate the process whereby internet-inspired radicalisation can lead to offline activism and the re-making of social ties. Neither Adrian nor Romain had any prior knowledge of Islam, nor any previous ties to Muslim community members before their conversions. Romain, further notes that his Internet-acquired religious identity facilitated a process of detachment whereby he systematically broke all ties with individuals and networks in his life who he deemed to be

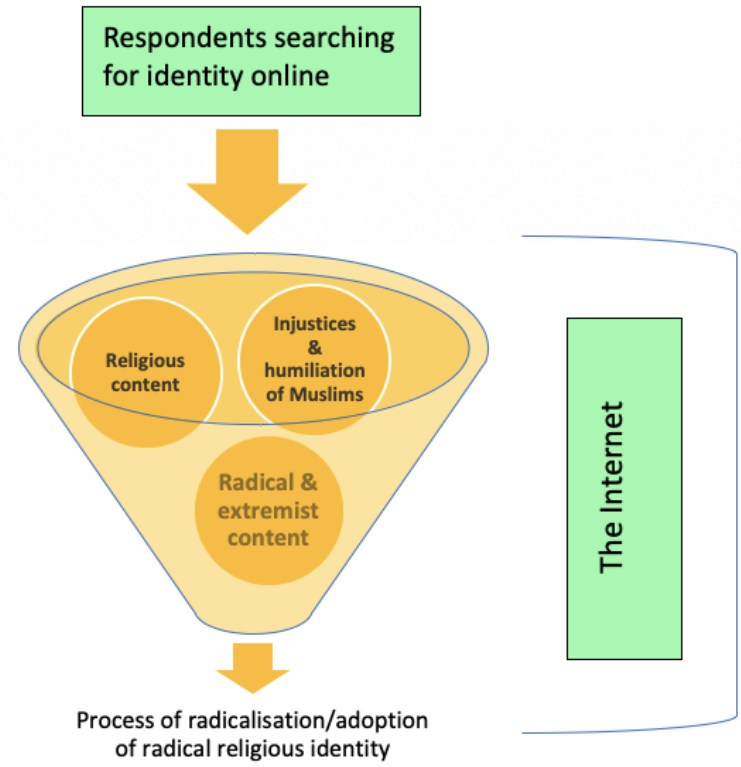


Figure 3: The process of radicalisation through the internet

AZIZ (NORWAY)

'I started making religious friends, and you also have a more religious environment here. The thing that made me more religious was that I started practising prayers and customs to distance myself from… stop being involved in drugs, selling and drinking and snorting and going to parties and taking other people's women … that is the gangster life […] I've distanced myself from that. I only did that because I was betrayed by my friends, right? I didn't believe in that friendship anymore. So I started distancing myself and became practising. Then it was the internet. Sitting and talking… because I didn't really have a clue about Islam, you know?'

part of the 'unbelievers' and re-made ties and re-rooted himself in a new community of likeminded individuals. A similar process of uprooting and re-rooting was shared by Aziz, a Norwegian respondent who recalled his experience of finding a new religious identity and seeking out likeminded individuals, without really knowing or understanding much about the religion, until he searched for Islam on the internet. Similarly, Mamuka, a Russian respondent who had very little knowledge of Islam, described how he contacted members of ISIS via the Russian social media site Vkontakte.

Collective experiences of discrimination, humiliation and injustices of the global Muslim community

A sense of collectively experienced injustice, humiliation and threat, registered by many respondents, reflects the perception among respondents of a relational inequality between non-Muslims and Muslims on a local and global scale whereby the former dominates and abuses the latter. This engenders a conflictual relationship with the state and its institutions, often resulting in respondents moving away from identifying with their nation state in favour of connecting with an imagined global Muslim community – the Ummah. The fate of Muslims around the world becomes part of another, vicarious trauma as one's own experiences are seen as an extension of the violence inflicted upon the global community of Muslims. An absence of civic participation locally is transformed into a pro-active approach to extricate fellow Muslims from collective injustices, which, for some, justifies a forceful or violent response. The footage of injustices and humiliation of Muslims around the world resonates with individual experiences of rejection, conflict and repression and the defence of Islam against its enemies worldwide becomes a path to redemption.

FRANK (NORWAY)

'I think there's an awful lot of injustice against Muslims more generally in wider society…But I see it…as a way in which God is testing me, you know. To see how strong my belief is. I automatically feel for them in particular, in the situation in Gaza, for example […] Muslims can be seen as a group which is treated incredibly unfairly.'

OSMAN (NORWAY)

[Talking about UK drone strikes in Pakistan] *'I learnt about the insidious way this drone system works in Pakistan. Against the innocent. Even if they somehow manage to kill one person, they've killed ten innocent people. And what makes me really angry is when, for example, Tony Blair recently talked about the Iraq War and confirmed that they did this to topple Saddam. And then he said, with tears in his eyes, he said "sorry". I feel angry about that because … I think there must be some accountability for their actions.'*

The construction of the global plight of Muslims as a mobilising discourse becomes a powerful motivating factor for respondents. The concept of 'the global Ummah' provides respondents with an imagined community in an immaterial space which knows no borders and is not embedded in tangible traditions. The protectionist discourse of defending the global Ummah offers respondents who have experienced deep feelings of isolation and alienation within mainstream society, a way to reinvent themselves and be reborn with a new, rewarding identity. This narrative facilitates their deliverance from a life of trauma and isolation and becomes part of a meaningful and rewarding cause, providing them with a renewed sense of purpose and ambition. Defending the global Ummah also allows respondents to feel as though they can redress the relational inequality they have experienced, and reverse the power dynamics by constructing the world as a hierarchical binary of believers and non-believers (*kuffar*).

ROMAIN (FRANCE)

'It's actually a war that's been going on for centuries. Between right and wrong. Between true and false. That's it. […] We're all part of this war. Even you, you're part of it [we laugh]… There's no neutral, you're either against or for.'

Radicalisation as a relational construct

A key finding from this study is that 'radicalisation' and 'extremism' are understood by milieu actors as intrinsically relational constructs. This means that to understand what constitutes 'extremist' or 'radical' we need to understand the relation between the subject who assigns the label and the behaviour, person, or group to which it is assigned (as much as the behaviour, person, or group itself). It also means that relational dynamics – interactions with others – are an important factor in both *facilitating* and *constraining* radicalisation. We consider here social ties, networks and identification with neighbourhoods and 'scenes' as important factors in re-rooting research participants and leading them away from extremism (see Figure 4).

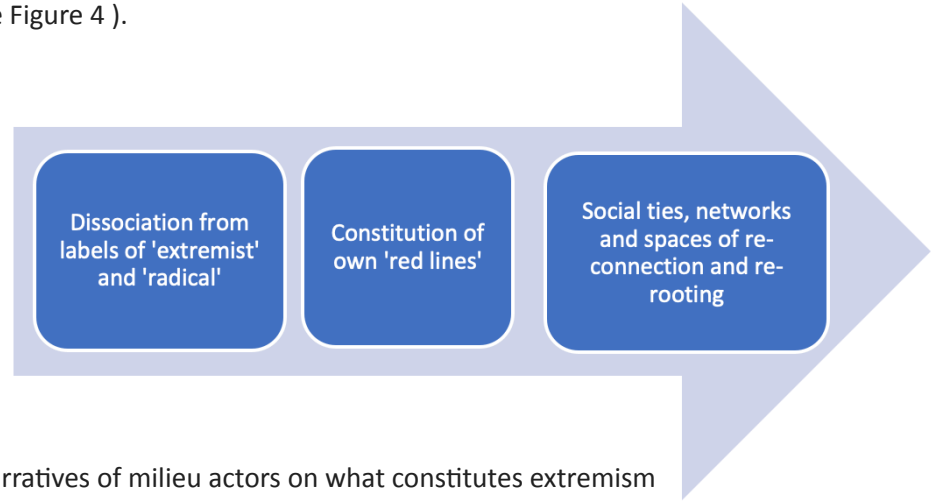


Figure 4: Key themes in narratives of milieu actors on what constitutes extremism

Re-constituting extremism: dissociation and drawing one's own red lines

The understanding that individuals, groups or behaviours are 'radical' or 'extremist' when labelled as such, and recognition of the power dynamics underpinning that process, leads respondents to dissociate from this labelling process and construct their own thresholds of what is acceptable and what is 'too extreme'.

Across all fieldwork sites, we found that 'extremism' carries a negative connotation and is understood, first and foremost, in terms of proximity to indiscriminate and illegitimate violence. In some cases, the use of violence is considered to be justified, such as in self-defence, although the majority of respondents did not support violence in any form. The label 'radical' is used also in relation to others in society to denote someone who is misguided or has lost one's bearings or crossed a line (having fallen victim, for example, to recruiters). It is also used to distance oneself from particular groups (most notably Islamic State) or religious traditions.

Although respondents rarely acknowledge their own positions on the scale of extremism, they often refer to violence as a personal threshold which they will not cross. The possibility of descending into violence often triggers a step back from extremism. In this way, this threshold delineates what an individual finds acceptable in terms of ideological positions and political actions. By identifying others (either inside or outside their milieu) who are considered 'too extreme for me', individuals establish limits on their own behaviour and trajectory towards extremism. These thresholds are relative to the individual, milieu and wider context they inhabit and so vary significantly. We found that respondents often understood that recognising what they consider to be 'too extreme'

'Well, radical is definitely what ISIS is; it's radical because, for me, it's not radical anymore, it's mentally ill for me, um, because that's just not normal […] people like from ISIS, that's radical to me, sick […]'

Mahdiya (Germany)

clarified those lines and could propel them away from extremism, or at least prevented them from becoming more extreme.

Consistent with the relational view on radicalism, few respondents consider themselves radical, and none think of themselves as extremist. Even respondents convicted of terrorist offences, such as Adrian, critique how the terms are conceptualised and interpreted. In such cases, of course, rejecting the notion of 'radical' may serve the function of legitimising one's actions.

ADRIAN (FRANCE)

'What is radical? You can be a fundamentalist, which is not forbidden, but without acting. In any case, I've never understood the word radical. It's just because they talk about it on TV and that's where they place me. Frankly, I know I'm a fundamentalist, but being radical I don't know what it means.'

Trajectories away from extremism: social ties, networks as cultural spaces

Interactions with others are what make any sequential model of radicalisation, i.e. discrimination + youth -> quest for identity -> internet search -> radicalisation, too simple. The relational dynamics of the context in which an identity crisis or sense of societal rejection is encountered plays a key role in young people's response to it and thus in shaping movement towards or away from extremism. Alongside the relational conflict discussed above, which erodes connection to the social fabric of mainstream society and facilitates radicalisation, this study also found a number of sites of interaction with others to be important in re-rooting research participants and leading them away from extremism. These include: mosques; neighbourhoods (associated cultural scenes); and wider social networks.

In opposition to the dominant media discourse, which presents mosques as potential sites of radicalisation, our respondents' experiences suggest that mosques bolster resilience against radical messages by offering a grounded perspective on Islamic practice and belief. Mosques have an active role in providing a religious environment and education that help to foster religious identity and counteract the religious knowledge taken from online sources. In this way, mosques are described as providing moral fabric and community, and a non-radicalising message.

'I think what the masjid are doing now is good. They're getting more involved with the youth and doing projects and such. They're actually taking a lot more responsibility for the youth as an organisation, and they know it's their responsibility now.'
Sayyid Qutb (UK)

'You can understand when an Imam says something extremist, if he says something extremist, they can close it [the mosque]. If he […] just says, "Don't drink, don't smoke, don't kill", then why should this mosque be closed? If, on the contrary, he promotes a good way of life?'
Said (Russia)

UK respondent, Abu Abdullah, also comments on how a local mosque's response to the Grenfell Tower fire in London, contributed towards a more positive image of Islam and the valuable societal role of the mosque.

ABU ABDULLAH (UK)

'I mean after Grenfell, it's helped change people's perceptions – some people's perceptions. It's all about that contact. A mosque needs to have that contact and the contact comes through the people. So, the Prophet's biggest form of like call to Islam and stuff like that, was that one to one, that physical contact sort of thing. It's not by killing and stuff like that. So, the Prophet established that. And as Muslims, they say about two, three million Muslims live in the UK. If, for example, every Muslim spoke to every person that he met, within a month you would reach all seventy million people that live in the UK on a conversational basis. But, a lot of people give a bad perception of Islam, or a bad image. First impressions count man. A lot of Muslims are not holding up what Islam teaches them.'

The neighbourhood also acts as a site where social ties and networks may facilitate trajectories away from extremism. For many respondents, living within 'Muslim areas' provides a sense of belonging and brotherhood, helping respondents cope with experiences of adversity and hardship including feelings of isolation, discrimination and persecution in mainstream society. The centrality of Islam in identity formation and the accompanying patterns of social interaction may lead some to break from mainstream society and potentially facilitate radicalisation trajectories. For others, such as Mo John (UK), physical proximity in a neighbourhood and shared experiences contribute positively to the formation of an identity based on shared Islamic faith and practice and a sense of socio-emotional grounding that allows one to resist radical messages.

MO JOHN (UK)

'[This neighbourhood] *is a place where it's very mixed, you know. There are a lot of people round here with different backgrounds. We integrate a lot. There's no, you know, a long time ago, yeah, there was probably a lot of racism as well. But now, because of the masjids that are opening around this area, it's very... it's brought people together basically from different backgrounds, I think. Personally, that's what I think anyway. You know, four, five years ago it wasn't like that. People were, you know, on their own; had their different views.*'

Respondents across fieldwork sites commonly referenced social ties offline as being a key protection against vulnerability to radical messaging. Indeed, in the German milieu, a number of instances are reported where respondents were dissuaded from following a radical path because it would require giving up *existing social ties* which were important to them. Latif (Germany), for example, said he chose not to join ISIS, because '*In the end, it only leads to crime and a minus in life. No way*', while Salih (Germany) says simply that it is his 'friends' that stop him from taking a radical path.

SALIH (GERMANY)

'*I think I am perfectly happy in Germany, so. Even if inequality, even if there is inequality here, that is not so relevant. If I don't get into a club, what do I lose? And I think my friends are like that, I was against it from the beginning, so. For me it was far away and terrible how one can do something like that. If a guy like that would come to me and try to persuade me somehow, there would be no possibility from the beginning, because I take something like that with a smile and reject it* [clicks his fingers], *I wouldn't do something like that. But what is it now, what really stops me from doing that?* [inhales deeply]. *My friends, I'd say.*'

In conclusion, we find that the respondents' reports of how they have navigated their (non-)radicalisation trajectories involve a complex and dynamic interplay of factors that exist on multiple levels. They include experiences of school failure and unemployment, honour culture, violence, delinquency, identity crisis as well as feelings of persecution, humiliation, rejection and state repression. They also reference engagement with networks spreading radical Islamist messaging and access to battle grounds. None of these factors can explain radicalisation on its own, but all contribute to feelings of anxiety and dread, a sense of isolation, alienation and persecution, that could heighten individual vulnerability to radical Islamist messaging. At the same time, they recognise the relational nature of 'radicalisation', the construction of notions of extremism and their application by those who have the power to do so. This allows them to reject such labelling and reconstruct what constitutes 'extremism' or 'radicalism' for themselves and establish 'red lines' that they choose not to cross. They establish important social bonds and ties, with family and friends but also with cultural scenes and institutions, such as mosques, in their neighbourhood which ground and re-root them in a way that protects them from radical(ising) messages.

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