



**EXCLUDED**

# *A sense of nonbelonging fuels violent radicalization in the United Kingdom*

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**T**hus far, most of the models and theories attempting to explain how and why individuals become radicalized tend to view radicalization as a consequence of some preceding phenomena. In 2015, the scholars Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins summarized the most recent empirical literature on the causes and dynamics of the radicalization of homegrown extremism in the West by proposing a theoretical synthesis. According to their theory, violent radicalization is, metaphorically speaking, a puzzle that is comprised of four pieces: grievances; networks and interpersonal ties; political and religious ideologies; and enabling environments and supporting structures. When these four pieces come together, individuals are said to transform into violent extremists. Although the “ingredients” are (thought to be) known, countering radicalization is still a very difficult and complex task. In fact, up to the present day, a single and universal explanation for radicalization has yet been found, and it seems that searching for one may be a fruitless endeavor.

Dr. Shiraz Maher, a recognized expert on jihadist movements, identifies issues of identity and belonging as the most significant drivers in many radicalization cases. This raises questions about how these issues contribute to violent radicalization. According to an analysis of the Citizenship Survey (2001-2011) for England and Wales by professors Saffron Karlsen and James Y. Nazroo, 90 percent of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians felt that they were a part of Britain. In other words, 90 percent identified themselves with British values. Although the percentage is quite high, there are still 10 percent who do

not feel that they belong to the United Kingdom. Given the fact that issues of identity and belonging are crucial drivers for radicalization and that more British Muslims have joined militant Islamist groups than have joined the British Armed Forces, it leads to questions about the extent to which feelings of nonbelonging lead to violent radicalization. This becomes crucial in creating and implementing more effective countermeasures to stop and contain the radicalization of vulnerable British citizens. Therefore, it is necessary to gain a more nuanced understanding of the concepts of identity, belonging and violent radicalization.

It's possible that politicians and policies, domestic situations, society in general, British mosques and the internet all convey a feeling of nonbelonging. Identifying these sources could significantly influence the violent radicalization of a few individuals, especially second- and third-generation Muslims. In this respect, it must be emphasized that the problem of violent radicalization is not that individuals are religiously fundamental in the first place, but that they belong to groups that are strongly determined by their ideology.

## **Social identity theory**

The key assumption of social identity theory (SIT) is that individuals are motivated to enhance and maintain self-esteem and a positive social identity. This leads individuals to make social comparisons between the group they belong to (in-group) and relevant groups they compare themselves with (out-group), with the ultimate aim of achieving both a distinct and positive position for the in-group and above all for their self-esteem, according to authors Donald M.

Taylor and Fathali M. Mogghadam. Nevertheless, if social identity is perceived as unsatisfactory, individuals will strive to leave the in-group and join a more positively distinct out-group. Alternatively, as Polish social psychologist Henri Tajfel found, they could seek to make the existing in-group more positively distinct.

According to authors Davie W. Brannan, Philip F. Esler and Anders Strindberg, SIT is composed of three components: cognitive, evaluative and emotional. SIT postulates that individuals identify with a single or many group(s) to which they belong. The cognitive component here is the knowledge that one belongs to a group. For instance, a young Muslim male identifies, based on his religion, with the Muslim community. Hence, he feels that he also belongs to a particular Muslim community (group of Muslims). The second component evaluates the membership of the individuals. As mentioned earlier, individuals strive to maintain and enhance their self-esteem and social identity. The membership could have a positive or

Consequently, he has two options: He could leave the Muslim community and join a new group, for instance, the Jewish or Christian community; or he could stay in the Muslim community and work to enhance the group's image. This could be achieved by, for example, becoming more religious and developing and executing pro-Muslim campaigns to improve the image of the Muslim community in the wider society. However, regardless of the option he chooses, it is ultimately about enhancing and maintaining self-esteem and social identity.

## Ideology and hate preachers

Ideology can constitute the most important factor in violent radicalization. In this respect, the takfiri ideology must be highlighted, which is understood as the practice of declaring someone as an unbeliever. This strict interpretation has mostly been used to eliminate opponents and achieve greater power. In 1803, for instance, Abd al-Aziz Ibn Muhammad used the takfiri ideology to justify the

slaughter of thousands of Shias in Kerbala (located today in Iraq), including women and children, according to author Karen Armstrong. The use of the takfiri ideology allows individuals to label someone as a nonbeliever (*kāfir*) to justify his or her killing.

In addition to the takfiri ideology, the so-called hate preachers add a dangerous element to the radicalization process. “It is sheer madness ... to ignore the fact that divisive preachers are perhaps the single most dangerous element to this whole situation that has been built,” a former extremist and recruiter told this author. He emphasized the persuasive qualities of these preachers: “Hate preachers, they make matters worse, they pervert the faith, they corrupt the hearts. ... They are the catalysts, they provide the poison, they are more than fuel, they are explosives.” In summary, the takfiri ideol-

ogy and hate preachers are crucial factors that channel the sense of nonbelonging into violent radicalization. The feeling of nonbelonging alone does not necessarily lead to radicalization — nonbelonging is widespread, whereas violent radicalization is not. What is required, therefore, is a mediator who can successfully channel the negative feeling of nonbelonging into the positive feeling of belonging, but belonging to the wrong group — a violent radical group.

## ‘Small p’ vs. ‘big p’

The theme of “small p” politics is of significant importance concerning the sense of belonging. The term refers to a key concept in political geography that classifies politics into two distinct categories — “big p” versus “small p.” In a traditional sense, big p politics deals with states and their relations with other states, whereas small p politics is concerned



This mosque is in the neighborhood in Dewsbury, Yorkshire, northern England, where a 17-year-old lived before joining the Islamic State and blowing himself up in a suicide attack in Iraq. REUTERS

negative value. Referring to the first example, the young Muslim male may, for instance, negatively evaluate his membership in the Muslim community.

This evaluation could be explained in several ways. Nevertheless, it leads to the third component of SIT, the emotional component. Based on his evaluation, the individual develops either a positive or negative emotional attachment to the (in-) group. In the previous example, the young Muslim male would develop a negative emotional attachment such as hate, contempt, shame, etc., to the (in-) group to which he still belongs — the Muslim community.

with politics by nonstate actors who tend to work through social movements and other groups, according to the 2008 book *Key Concepts in Political Geography*. Nevertheless, as social and urban geographer Dr. Arshad Isakjee points out, small p politics is not only concerned with politics by nonstate actors, it also deals with politics of identity and belonging. The latter, author Nira Yuval-Davis writes, distinguishes two types of belonging: the emotional belonging that is about personal issues, such as what makes one feel comfortable, at home and happy; and the politics of belonging that is concerned with drawing lines between groups within states — who belongs to “us” and who belongs to “them.” To put it differently, politicians and policies can either convey a feeling of belonging or a sense of nonbelonging that is crucial for one’s understanding of identity. Following from this, Isakjee says, small p politics is as important as big p politics.

An open letter published in *The Guardian* underlines the serious impact that small p politics has when drawing a line between British society and Muslims living in the U.K. In the letter, a British Muslim addresses then-Prime Minister David Cameron’s speech on tackling extremism in the U.K. that had aroused much anger among British Muslims. The letter writer laments, “Despite being born in Manchester, growing up here and being a proud Mancunian (let’s overlook my support for Liverpool FC), for the first time in 37 years I feel as though I don’t belong. And yes, I am Muslim. Just a British Muslim.” This quote highlights two important issues. First, the power of politicians to establish a dividing line in society, or more precisely, to divide British Muslims from the rest of the British people. Second, dividing the British people into separate groups could force the first group to draw in on itself, uniting in solidarity and ultimately, establishing a parallel society, thus furthering the alienation of British Muslims from the rest of the British population.

The following quote by a young British Muslim woman, borrowed from a study by Tahir Abbas and Assmar Siddique, underpins this argument: “[An] increasing number of young Muslim women are wearing the Hijab (headscarf) and men are growing beards and wearing caps. ... I think that this is a form of resistance ... to ... racism and what they, I suppose, see as an attack on their faith. It provides a sense of identity.” If British Muslims are compelled by politicians or policies to adopt “British values” and above all are told directly or indirectly they do not belong to British society, it could have severe implications concerning their radicalization process. If British Muslims no longer feel that they are British, it will make being a Muslim, according to SIT, positively distinct and help enhance and maintain their social identity. Consequently, these individuals could adopt more cultural and religious Muslim values that could result in a stricter interpretation of Islam — in other words, becoming religiously fundamental.

### **Domestic situation**

The alienation of British Muslims is not only caused by politicians and policies, but can also start in the home. According to a former extremist and recruiter interviewed by this author: “What contributes to radicalization is how a person has grown

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up at home without adequate self-esteem.” Family discipline, such as strict obedience and respecting parents, has a striking connection with self-esteem among minority adolescents. According to a 1997 study by J.E. Olsen, B.K. Barber and S.C. Shagle, exerting psychological control within families that emphasize collectivist values, such as interdependence, leads to lower self-esteem in children. Also, a 2000 study by X. Chen, M. Liu and D. Li demonstrates that the family environment has a significant impact on the physical and mental well-being of adolescents. Bearing these two studies in mind, it is clear that an uncomfortable family life caused by excessive discipline and a lack of communication within the family significantly affects young people’s well-being.

The lack of communication within families could lead individuals with low self-esteem to develop psychological distress such as emotional vulnerability. A study by psychology professor Meifen Wei and others examined whether the use of social support concerning racial discrimination could lead to psychological distress for individuals with high or low levels of self-esteem. They concluded that low levels of social support, in other words, lack of communication, may put male students with low self-esteem at risk of developing psychological distress. However, the study was inconclusive regarding female students.

The case study of Omar al Hammami — a young male who joined a Somali terrorist camp — demonstrates the severe impact a domestic situation could have. His radicalization process can be described as incremental and started with his interest in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. *The New York Times* reported that he remarked, “It’s difficult to believe a Muslim could have done this.” He concluded that he did not have enough knowledge of Islam, which led him to search for mentors and teachers. It could be argued that these mentors were hate preachers who used radical, violent ideology to violently radicalize Hammami. The case study does not provide enough evidence to support this assumption, but it could be argued that Hammami’s domestic situation led him to pursue a strict interpretation of Islam, namely Salafism. His friends believed that Hammami’s attraction to Salafism can be attributed to him asserting his differences with his father. Consequently, it could be argued that, according to SIT, Hammami did not feel he belonged to his family and thus was searching for a new group to enhance his social identity. Unfortunately, he joined the wrong group — a Somali terrorist organization.

## Society

Likewise, society can cause susceptible people to become emotionally vulnerable. Racism toward Muslims can severely affect their sense of belonging. There are varying ways in which racism can be conveyed, such as cultural racism (how ethnic groups are portrayed in the media), institutional racism (policies and/or institutional

procedures, e.g., the implications of counterradicalization policies) and interpersonal racism (racism that occurs to individuals in daily life), according to psychology professor Elizabeth Brondolo. A 2012 study by Brondolo and others found that experiencing racism is likely to contribute to the development of symptoms such as depression. Therefore, both the domestic situation and society could be significant contributors to the emotional vulnerability that puts individuals at higher risk of becoming violently radicalized — violent radical behavior could be interpreted as a response to racism. Abbas and Siddique examined the perceptions of the process of radicalization among British South Asian Muslims in Birmingham, England. One interviewee stood out with his statement concerning racism and radicalization: “Radical behavior is a response to many factors I suppose ... a response to oppression, exclusion, racism ... which make young people adopt a radical form of Islam as a form of resistance.” Politicians, policies, the domestic situation and society have the power to convey the message of belonging or nonbelonging. In the case of British Muslims, all these factors could be seen as interlinked and, above all, facilitating the process of violent radicalization by making vulnerable adolescents susceptible to violent radical ideologies.

Similarly, the 2015 British documentary *Exposure – Jihad: A British Story* demonstrates how the feeling of nonbelonging led in two cases to embracing a violent radical ideology. In the documentary, Deeyah Khan investigates the roots of Islamic extremism in the U.K. by speaking to reformed extremists — among others — about the reasons young British Muslims join violently radicalized groups like ISIS. Two answers by two interviewees — Alyas Karman and Munir Zamir — stand out. They share a factor that facilitated their violent radicalization, namely the feeling of nonbelonging conveyed by British society. Karman and Zamir felt rejected by British society because of their ethnic backgrounds and in Zamir’s case because of a disability. Zamir said: “PAKI GO HOME! I heard that religiously like the five times call to prayer for the first 16 years of my life.” These continuous and intense racist utterances deeply affected Zamir and, above all, emphasized that he did not belong to British society. In contrast, Karman said: “I’ve done everything to fit in, I even got the white girlfriend and everything else ... and still you’re not accepted.” Both cases underline the significance of belonging — both were rejected from British society, and that led them to join a more distinct group to improve their social identities. Unfortunately, they joined the wrong group and came under the influence of a hate preacher who channeled their grievances into violent radical attitudes and behaviors.

## British mosques

British mosques should constitute a place of solace that offers guidance and support or, more precisely, a source of belonging. If mosques convey a feeling of nonbelonging,



radical groups will fill that vacuum by providing a violent ideology that appeals to vulnerable adolescents. Half of the British Muslim population is under 25 years old, constituting a large target for radical groups.

Two important factors undermine the role of British mosques. The first is the way British mosques are operated, and the second is the cultural and language barriers of British imams. Imran Süleman, a British-born and trained imam who has worked in mosques across the U.K., told Samira Ahmed for a 2015 British radio report that, in his view, many elder imams from the Indian subcontinent insist on running British mosques as they would be run in India or Pakistan. According to a Quilliam Foundation poll in September 2008, the vast majority of British imams were born abroad, or were trained abroad. Though the statistics are nearly 10 years old, it could be argued that little has changed. If the imams refuse to adopt modern and British cultural values, it results in mosques being run like those abroad, which in turn results in large numbers of adolescents feeling that they do not belong because the imams preach in the manner that is foreign to what is found in a liberal and democratic state.

Consequently, young people search for sources that preach Islam in a context they better relate to. Violent radical groups have the potential to fill this gap. “A lot of young people, when they go to mosques and they see the

Members of the British Muslim Forum and religious leaders from differing faiths pay their respects to the victims of the Ariana Grande concert bombing in England. Images of peace and inclusiveness can discourage youths from radicalizing. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

narrow-mindedness, the cultural baggage, the ceremony in a language that they can’t understand, they tend to go towards extremism or they go to the likes of ceremony preachers whom they see as a lot more articulate and who have a more clear vision,” Süleman, the British imam, said on the radio report. Concerning cultural and language barriers, British imams are unable to address how British Muslims should meet those challenges. This vacuum, Abbas and Siddique argue, is easily filled by violent radical groups who claim to understand the problems of disaffected youths, provide seemingly right answers and, above all, speak a language they understand. Furthermore, the anti-political attitude of British mosques enables and facilitates the spread of radical ideology. The damaging side effect of this attitude is that people who want to discuss political issues have to find secret places where they can talk freely about their thoughts and opinions without fear of being kicked out of the mosque, which according to Isakjee, is in most cases the punishment for doing so. If mosques do not provide a place

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where Muslims can discuss political issues, violent radical groups will provide an alternative.

To support this argument with empirical evidence, the radicalization story of a Belgian teenager named Jejoen Botnik is worth mentioning. His “journey to jihad,” as *The New Yorker* magazine called it, began when he was 15 years old and started to perform poorly at school and his girlfriend broke up with him. His father described his mental well-being as “Jejoen fell down in a black hole.” Jejoen himself depicted this period as “one of searching and looking for an alternative to the pain.” At age 16, he started to date a Moroccan girl whom he liked very much. She told him to learn about Islam if he wanted to see her again. Consequently, Jejoen converted to Islam in 2011 at the De Koepel Mosque in Belgium. The crucial moment in his journey to jihad was not converting to Islam, but rather the mosque he visited. The De Koepel Mosque, built in Antwerp in 2005, had become a home for hundreds of converts and second-generation Muslims. The crucial problem was that Friday prayers were conducted in Arabic or Turkish, languages Jejoen did not understand, providing an opportunity for hate preachers to step in. Three months after his conversion, a neighbor named Azzedine invited him to the headquarters of Sharia4Belgium, an organization dedicated to establishing a caliphate in Belgium. Jejoen spent much of his time at Sharia4Belgium and was most likely radicalized there. The highlight of his journey was a trip to Syria to join friends on the battlefield, *The New Yorker* reported. Once again, a sense of nonbelonging — brought about by language barriers, a need to improve social identity and hate preachers — led a vulnerable youth to join a more distinct group. He was interested in Islam but could not understand the imam in the mosque. Sharia4Belgium seized the opportunity and offered him what he wanted — to learn Islam in a language he understood. Unfortunately, the organization preaches a violent radical ideology rather than true Islam.

### **The internet’s role**

The internet is another important factor concerning the sense of nonbelonging. In today’s digitalized world, it is a crucial factor in radicalization. First, it serves as a virtual messenger for society; second, it provides a hub for alienated people. As a messenger, according to Isakjee, the internet, or more specifically the comment sections for online newspaper articles, blogs and on Facebook, all have an especially damaging impact on an individual’s feeling of belonging to society. The online comment sections of, for instance, the Huffington Post or *The Guardian* are full of racist comments against Muslims that say they do not belong to British society. It could be argued that the internet leads to emotional vulnerability because it constitutes a virtual space for society. Furthermore, as reported by Dr. Paul Cornish, the internet serves as a virtual space where anonymity is guaranteed, unlike on the streets where people have to directly confront one another. To put it another way, the internet could be seen as an instrument that allows society to be anonymously racist.

As mentioned earlier, many young Muslims do not feel that they belong at British mosques, and they are not permitted to

discuss political issues within these mosques. The feeling of not belonging, combined with politics, domestic situations and society, could lead individuals to search for an alternative place where they can connect with like-minded people who also feel excluded. The internet offers the perfect place to easily connect. According to Isakjee, the internet has become a hub for alienated individuals. A study by the website [debatingeurope.eu](http://debatingeurope.eu) found that 32 percent of Europeans use the internet to follow politics. Moreover, 40 percent of those ages 15-24 say that they have expressed their opinions on public issues through social media, reflecting a widespread interest in public participation. If Europeans (especially second- and third-generation European Muslims) feel alienated — caused by politics, domestic situations, society, mosques and the internet — violent radical groups could draw upon and channel this interest in participation. In this regard, the so-called Islamic State has been the most successful tech-oriented terrorist organization in history. It understands how to use the surface web, deep web, dark web, social media and even encrypted messaging apps, such as Telegram, to disseminate propaganda, recruit new members and inspire or even direct their followers to carry out terror attacks.

Despite the dominant perception in governments and among academics that the internet factors in radicalization, it should be seen as facilitating the process rather than causing it. The former extremist and recruiter interviewed by this author supports that conclusion. While talking about his past, he stressed that he and his peers became violently radicalized by watching VHS cassettes and not by the internet. The driving force behind their radicalization was the grievance factor. The interviewee and his peers decided to engage in conflict based on the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and their perception of the cruelty toward poor and innocent Afghan victims. In addition, both Isakjee and the interviewee underpin their arguments by pointing out that the majority of people have easy access to violent radical content on the internet; however, not everybody becomes violently radicalized. Furthermore, violent radicalization is a two-way process, which first requires an active contribution from a person interested in radicalization. In summary, the internet provides an easily accessible platform, but people must already be open to the arguments to become violently radicalized.

## Conclusion

The sense of nonbelonging, conveyed by politicians, policies, domestic situations, British mosques and the internet, significantly influences an individual's radicalization. These factors determine the choice of either

staying in the in-group or leaving it and joining a more distinct out-group. In the case of British Muslims, there is a high likelihood that some individuals decide not to belong to British society anymore and instead identify more distinctly as Muslims by adopting more religious attitudes and behaviors. Neglecting his or her citizenship could be caused by politicians and policies for instance. Consequently, becoming more religious — wearing a



A Muslim attends Friday prayers at the Baitul Futuh Mosque in Morden, south London. British Muslim youths can find it difficult to connect with traditional mosques. REUTERS

headscarf or growing a beard as a response to racism — furthers the alienation of British Muslims to the wider society. In turn, that could ultimately result in the establishment of a parallel society in which individuals seek to enhance and maintain their social identity and self-esteem by becoming religiously fundamental.

Nevertheless, the problem of becoming violently radicalized is not religious fundamentalism, but belonging to the wrong group. This helps to explain why only a few become violently radicalized, while others might become nonviolently radicalized — violent radicalization, or just radicalization, depends on which group individuals feel they belong to. Individuals who believe they belong to a certain group will naturally adopt its common attitudes, behaviors and values — the group determines the orientation, violent or nonviolent. In the end, each person decides to stay in a group and adapt that group's values or leave it and join another group that is perceived as better for his or her self-esteem and social identity. □