

ROOTING OUT HOMEGROWN TERRORISM

Timothy Compston
*looks at what it is that
causes individuals to
become radicalised*



Over the past few years the level of terrorist attacks worldwide has been on the up and the West – UK, mainland Europe, US, Canada and Australia – has been very much in the sights of radical Islamists who believe in a violent form of jihad. Although some atrocities have been instigated by people who have come in from the outside – specifically for the purpose – many other incidents are the result of actions by those who have either been born nearby like Abdelhamid Abaaoud – who masterminded the November 2015 Paris attacks and lived in Belgium – or

are long-term residents and citizens, even attending school and university in the country in question.

Sadly, in this ever more interconnected world, the process of radicalisation – that can cause individuals, such as the Chechen-American brothers behind the Boston Marathon bombing, to turn on their fellow citizens, and become more and more removed from broader society – seems to be a relatively short one. This process is increasingly, say security and counter-terrorism experts, being driven by online interactions, propaganda videos from hate preachers and groups like ISIS, and other material, as well as the concerted face-

to-face grooming of individuals who may be receptive to this extreme ideology. Then, of course, there is the clear and present danger posed by the thousands of individuals who have been persuaded to travel to Syria and Iraq as so-called 'foreign fighters', who may have engaged in horrific violence, and want to share their extreme views or engage in terrorist actions when they return home.

THE NEXT GENERATION

As to why certain second-generation immigrants may be more susceptible to radicalisation compared with their parents, Philip Ingram, a former military intelligence officer and chairman at Global Intelligence Insight, partly attributes this to the fact that the first generation are pleased to be accepted when they come into a new society whereas the second generation may find themselves caught between two cultures: "They are trying to find some form of cultural identity and those that are very vulnerable are picked up by the extremists and given this sense of identity and sense of purpose," he concludes.

Heading across the Atlantic, in the wake of the attacks in Orlando, and Bernardino and the Boston Marathon, CNN's national security analyst Peter Bergen sought to find out more about what was motivating 'America's homegrown terrorists'. Writing in his 2016 book, entitled *United States of Jihad*, Bergen reckons that many of the easy assumptions that are often made about jihadists in the US are, in fact, not borne out by the lives of most American militants: "It is tempting to assume that the decision to turn to terrorism must be rooted in some traumatic life experience; that these men must be young hotheads without family obligations; that they are pathologically disturbed, or career criminals, or at the very least not very bright".

Challenging conventional thinking, Bergen goes on to reveal that among the 360 militants that he examined for his book, none of the oft-quoted generalisations hold: "Their average age is 29; more than a third are married and a similar proportion have children; 12 percent have served time in prison, compared to 11 percent of the American male population, while around 10 percent have mental health issues, a lower incidence than in the general population". The upshot of this, points out Bergen, is that these individuals are on average as well educated and emotionally stable as the typical citizen: "They are ordinary Americans".

Drilling down into what is the catalyst for 'ordinary Americans' turning to terrorism. Bergen explains that the work of psychiatrists, terrorism experts and police officials means that there is now a better idea about the thinking of Islamist terrorists than was the case at the time of 9/11, a decade and a half ago. He says that for many individuals their decision to take a militant path is prompted – at least in part: "By a desire for recognition or belonging, often both. Jihad offered them the opportunity to be 'somebody' and at the same time to be part of something bigger than they were".

Back on this side of the Atlantic, interviewing professor Richard English last year about terrorism and political violence – who was then the director of the Handa Centre at the University of St Andrews and is now a pro-vice chancellor at Queen's University

Belfast – he traced a big shift in thinking to the birth of 'jihadist terrorism': "In other words, an anti-Western Islamically based variant of a very minority strand within Islamic political thinking". Professor English went on to explain that this jihadist strand is associated with trying to produce 'a kind of domination' by a certain reading of Islam: "This is evidenced, for instance, in hostility to American-led Western interests and hostility to certain regimes in Muslim countries, which these jihadists consider to be illegitimate and apostate".

Touching on the terrorist threat and radicalisation at home and abroad, professor English agrees that these scenarios are very different: "I think that, as we saw with al-Qaeda, if you have a group which has lethal intentions towards the West but has a kind of safe-haven in Afghanistan that provides a danger. Similarly, if you have Syria and Iraq where ISIS can gain a foothold that presents a threat, which is not only regionally challenging but may impact on Brussels, Paris and London".

On the home front, Professor English reflects that in Western Europe one factor which certainly comes into play is how the state acts or reacts to the perceived threat: "All states quite rightly want to protect their citizens and so have to think about

LOOKING AHEAD, THE CONSENSUS IS THAT THERE AREN'T ANY SHORT-TERM FIXES

the measures to put in place with regards to that. In terms of people becoming disaffected and prone to political violence, you will always have some who will. The thing is to turn down the volume on that to make the numbers as small as you possibly can".

Professor English acknowledges that trying to establish counter narratives, which might help the situation here, is no easy task: "There are some ways that it has been tried in terms of counter narratives for example people who have gone out as foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq and then become disillusioned afterwards. Sometimes those voices can dissuade people, similarly I think the ways states tell good news stories can be important. So, for example, in the UK the Mayor of London recently elected is Muslim so it is hard to present the United Kingdom for all its flaws as a place which is deeply, systematically, anti-Muslim".

NO EASY ANSWERS

Considering the utility of specific UK Government initiatives, Professor English stresses at the outset that it is very easy for people to criticise Government policies, however in their defence he reckons that there are no simple answers here: "What I would say is that the record of Contest and Prevent has been mixed. It is true that there have been some important statements and in-roads made". An approach that Professor English thinks was not particularly wise relates to the linking together of the idea of pursuing Muslim coherence as part of the British community with counter terrorism: "Probably there was a need

**Abdelhamid Abaaoud,
who was behind the
November 2015 Paris
attacks, lived in Belgium**

to separate out the idea of how Muslims were integrated with the idea of preventing some people turning to violence,” he concludes.

PROBLEMATIC PREVENT

For her part, Baroness Warsi a member of the House of Lords – and former Minister of State for Faith and Communities when David Cameron was Prime Minister – continues to have issues with the Government's approach to extremism and is now calling, as reported by the BBC, for the Prevent element to be paused and subjected to an independent review. According to Baroness Warsi the Prevent scheme has 'huge problems' – including the quality of its training – and she went on to tell

“THESE INDIVIDUALS ARE AS WELL EDUCATED AND EMOTIONALLY STABLE AS THE TYPICAL CITIZEN”

the BBC that the 'brand' had, in fact, become 'toxic' where the Muslim community was concerned. Responding to the criticism levelled at Prevent, Home Secretary Amber Rudd said that now is not time to pause the scheme and that recent events like the Westminster attack: “Reinforce the need to make sure we have active communities trying to stop people being radicalised”.

Offering a different perspective on the state

of play here, Professor Anthony Glee, director of the Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies at the University of Buckingham, acknowledges that there has been much criticism – including from the former independent reviewer of the Government's counter terrorism legislation, David Anderson QC – about Prevent which is not, in his view necessarily, warranted: “His [David Anderson's] point is that it [Prevent] needs to be reformed because the Muslim community doesn't like it. I think that he is quite wrong about that”. Glee feels that unfortunately certain Muslim community leaders have sought to make capital over Prevent being a way of spying on Muslims when, he contends, this is not actually the case: “Basically it [Prevent] is a policy that has been developed against what I would call Islamist extremism, that is not Islamic. The vast majority of Muslims want nothing to do with this but it is a particular interpretation of Islam that supports political violence,” he concludes.

Looking ahead, the consensus is that there aren't any short-term fixes. This is a view echoed by Professor Richard English who feels that in all probability past experience would suggest that we are looking at a generational process whereby the hopes of people in ISIS turn out not to have been fulfilled: “You find a kind of cycle of these things. The difficulty is that these cycles are quite long and people who know about Northern Ireland, for example, appreciate that the Provisional IRA took decades before they decided to change path and go for something less violent and the same for the UDA” ●

Timothy Compston

is a journalist and PR professional who specialises in security issues. He studied International Relations and Strategic Studies at Lancaster University, is PR director at Compston PR and a previous chairman of both the National Committee and CCTV PR Committee of the British Security Industry Association.

Investigators examine the crime scene following the bomb attack at the Boston Marathon in 2013

