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## **Militant Islamist Radicalisation**

### **Summary**

Militant Islamist radicalisation may be described as a dynamic process where an individual converts to a radical interpretation of Islam. CTA notes that it is the pronounced support for or will to use violence as a means that defines militant Islamism.

There is no clear profile that defines those who are radicalised to the point of supporting militant Islamism. Rather, a combination of several factors determines whether an individual moves from radical thought to violent action or chooses a different path. These factors include conditions that are individually and structurally determined, as well as specific events that motivate the support for or use of violence. CTA assesses that it is at the crossroads between these factors that the highest degree of vulnerability towards radicalisation occurs and the will to commit violence arises.

CTA assesses that militant Islamist messages representing a black and white narrative encouraging individuals to take responsibility and act on their own increasingly resonate among socially marginalised young people who are prone to use violence and are searching for an identity as well as status. Such messages are currently being conveyed by easily accessible, explicit propaganda on social media that addresses young people in particular. CTA assesses that the proclamation of a caliphate in Syria/Iraq by the so-called Islamic State (IS) has accelerated militant Islamist radicalisation.

According to CTA's assessment, militant Islamist radicalisation often takes place within certain social groups where individuals can form a militant Islamist interpretation of the world and confirm each other in this interpretation without being challenged. These social groups offer vulnerable individuals recognition, identity and motivation in the form of a coherent narrative of injustice in which the individual is often a victim, thus legitimising the use of violence.

It is CTA's assessment that such social groups thrive in Islamist communities, conflict zones, criminal gang circles and prison communities as well as in closed groups on social media. Furthermore, stays in conflict zones and/or links to criminal circles may be of particular significance to the capacity of radicalised individuals to commit violence.

This analysis focuses on militant Islamist radicalisation. It assesses the factors that may lead to radicalisation and the when and why of individuals' transition from radical thought to violent action. CTA recognises that radicalisation is not only linked to Islamism and thus may take place in other extremist circles.

### **1. What is radicalisation? Clarification of concepts and causality**

CTA defines radicalisation as an individually determined and dynamic psychological process during which a dedicated individual seeking meaning increasingly:

- questions the existing order of things
- moves towards a more extremist, religious or political world view, often defined by a simplistic, one-sided black and white narrative
- forms a (new) identity in accordance with this world view
- expresses personal responsibility for changing the existing order of things
- expresses his/her will to use violence as a means to this end

CTA notes that it is the will to use violence which defines radicalisation as an area of priority to national authorities. Political or religious commitment does not in itself constitute a threat.

According to CTA's assessment, the will to use violence primarily emanates from structural, individual and situation-specific factors. Structural factors are here defined as the general conditions prerequisite for a process of radicalisation. However, structural factors do not alone explain why some individuals become radicalised and others do not. Individual factors are conditions that influence individuals' vulnerability to radicalisation. Finally, situation-specific factors influence individuals and may have a triggering effect as far as the use of violence is concerned. In other words, situation-specific factors determine whether an individual under the influence of structural and individual factors ends up moving from radical thought to the use of violence.

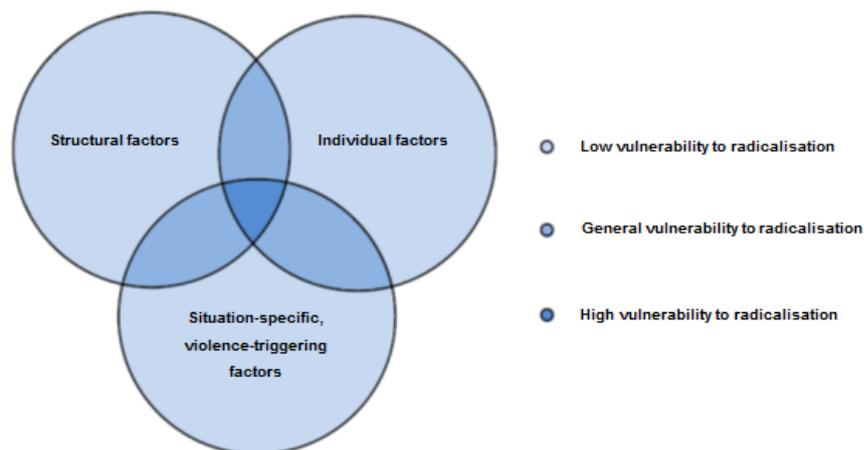
Structural factors of importance to radicalisation include socio-cultural and socio-economic factors, such as increasing individualisation within communities previously characterised by traditional norms and values. Structural factors influencing radicalisation may also be more locally rooted, e.g. the degree to which an individual is included in the job market.

Individual factors have a direct impact on individuals' vulnerability to radicalisation and are in all likelihood of vital importance as to who becomes radicalised to the point of supporting violence. Individual factors of importance to radicalisation include a perceived or real lack of recognition, and social, economical or political marginalisation.

Individual factors also include psychological vulnerability and primary socialisation, including a learned violent disposition. Gender and age also play a role, as there is a predominance of young people and men moving within radical circles.

Situation-specific, violence-triggering factors may be of an objective or a subjective kind and may take on general or individual meaning. Such factors include perceived or real violations of an individual's nationality, ethnicity or religion at home or abroad, or perceived insults, e.g. to religious figures or dogmas. Individually determined, situation-specific factors triggering violence include, among other events, death within the immediate family or a personal crisis that contributes to an experience of loss of social status, such as exclusion from the social circles at school, losing one's job or receiving a prison sentence.

It is CTA's assessment that, while the sum of structural and individual factors influences the vulnerability of individuals to radicalisation, it is the situation-specific factors that have a mobilising and triggering effect in terms of when and against whom a radicalised individual decides to act violently. In CTA's assessment, it is at the crossroads between these factors that the highest degree of vulnerability towards radicalisation occurs.



## 2. The significance of social group affiliation

Being part of a group offers identity and status. According to CTA's assessment, the degree of social group affiliation – i.e. being part of a group and the extent to which an individual sees himself/herself as being part of a group – plays a significant role in individual radicalisation processes. Such processes often take place within an enclosed social setting – a so-called echo chamber – where members of a social group acknowledge each other and confirm for each other a shared, particular view of the world without being challenged. A charismatic leading member of the group – a

radicaliser – may also influence the rest of the group in a specific direction. A radicaliser may be a local, but he may also be an influential individual holding radical beliefs, living abroad and enjoying a high standing within the social group in question.

Social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are easily accessible, virtual group communities where ideas, information and messages can be disseminated and exchanged across national borders. Social media are also home to closed internet group fora where messages with a potentially radicalising effect may be shared, including explicit propaganda e.g. from conflict zones glorifying the use of violence. At the same time, social media are portable and are therefore available 24/7. It is CTA's assessment that social media may function as an accelerator in the radicalisation process because they increase the accessibility of radicalising messages as well as the speed by which these messages may be disseminated and shared. This may allow for individuals to move unnoticed from radical thought to violent action. However, experience gained from PET's efforts to counter violent extremism indicates that, for most individuals, online radicalisation does not stand alone but is in most cases supplemented by personal contact to other individuals or groups.

On the other hand, in cases where individuals have become radicalised on their own, experience from abroad shows that online radicalisation, as well as psycho-social factors, matter to a higher degree. Even individuals who are not formally part of a social group are, however, rarely radicalised without an outside influence. Rather, such individuals form part of – or see themselves as being part of – some sort of virtual group community. It is CTA's assessment that if an individual perceives himself/herself as not being part of any social group this may contribute to the individual becoming radicalised.

The need for being part of a group may initiate or reinforce a radicalisation process depending on the character of the group and the degree of vulnerability of the individual. Being part of a group does not necessarily lead to radicalisation in itself, but certain social groups may further radicalisation to the point of support for violence or reinforce an ongoing process of radicalisation. According to CTA's assessment, an individual who has a deeply rooted identity proves more difficult to influence towards a radical interpretation of Islam.

A common factor among individuals who become radicalised is that they are motivated by a perceived or real injustice or offence committed against them or against the group or world view with which they identify. It is CTA's assessment that radicalisation is a phenomenon which is becoming increasingly prominent, especially among socially

marginalised young people seeking an identity. Among the reasons for this is the ability of extremist groups to communicate a black and white narrative through social media, which increasingly calls for individuals to take individual responsibility and act in response to a perceived or real injustice.

### **3. Militant Islamist radicalisation**

Militant Islamists are Muslims who to a large degree share religious tradition, practise and Holy Scripture with other Muslims. Militant Islamists differ from other Muslims with regard to their radical interpretation of the Quran and the scriptures (*hadith*) that recount the practise of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunna*). Therefore, militant Islamist radicalisation may be described as a process where an individual – already Muslim or not – converts to a radical and militant interpretation of Islam. Militant Islamist groups such as al-Qaida and the group that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) are Sunni Muslims. There are no similar Shia Muslim groups with the same degree of a global militant Islamist agenda.

Militant Islamists are characterised by their focus on the Islamic ideal of *jihad* (the effort or struggle to strive in the path of God). In a militant Islamist interpretation, *jihad* becomes an unambiguous command, which obligates every "true" Muslim to fight with violent means to further the cause of God or to protect other Muslims. Militant Islamists regard themselves as being the only "true" Muslims and accuse other Muslims of being infidels (the concept of *takfir*). Militant Islamists emphasise the antagonism to other Muslims and to all others in general by consistently referring to themselves – not as Muslims – but as *muwahhidin* (those who profess to one God) or *mujahidin* (those who fight in the path of God). Others are referred to as *kuffar* (infidels), *murtaddin* (apostates) or *munafiqin* (hypocrites). Militant Islamists such as IS do not recognise Shia Muslims as Muslim but regard them as infidels and hence a legitimate target for violent action.

The concept of justice is a core element in the militant Islamist narrative. The identification with historical or current, perceived or real offences and injustices committed against Muslims legitimises the militant Islamist fight and motivates the individual militant Islamist. The Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad and the West's military involvement in conflicts in the Muslim world are examples of events that form part of this narrative and which may function as radicalising as well as situation-specific, violence-triggering factors.

There is no one profile for individuals who become radicalised to the point of supporting militant Islamism. However, experience gained from both Danish and foreign terror

cases indicate that a relatively large number of those individuals who plan or commit acts of militant Islamist terrorism share a number of psycho-social features (individual factors) that may have influenced their vulnerability to radicalisation and, ultimately, their readiness to use violence. These are:

- Socio-economic marginalisation, which includes exclusion from the job market
- No or only little or discontinued education
- An absent or violent father
- Psychological vulnerability or mental health issues, including that of the parents of the individual in question (psychologically vulnerable/ill or traumatised parent)
- Learned violent disposition through upbringing (family/social environment)

### **3.1. Indications of militant Islamist radicalisation**

Indications of militant Islamist radicalisation may be:

- Fascination of militant Islamism, including terrorist attacks and propaganda that glorifies the use of violence
- Online or physical contact with individuals with militant Islamist beliefs
- Disgust at people holding different ideological or religious beliefs
- Avoidance of mixing with people holding different points of view or beliefs
- An interest in violence/weapons/explosives
- A wish to achieve martyrdom (*shahada*) or to emigrate to a conflict zone (*hijra*)
- Taking a "warrior name" such as "Abu X al-Muhajir"
- Support for the killing of or willingness to kill people who hold different points of view or beliefs

Militant Islamists are self-conscious and like to stage themselves with a flag, the Quran or weapons in hand. The flag indicates group affiliation, the Quran and the weapon that the person in question is fighting for a just cause in the path of God. The raised index finger, which is often seen in militant Islamist propaganda, symbolises that there is only one God.

CTA notes that militant Islamist radicalisation is an individual process, which does not necessarily include all of the above indications. At the same time, CTA notes that the indications listed above, especially if they are observed in an individual that lacks status and strives for recognition, should give rise to concern.

As part of the process of becoming a militant Islamist, individuals may change their appearance and behaviour in order to demonstrate their new affiliation and emphasise the difference between "them" and "us". At the same time, ordinary converts within Islamic circles may feel the need to demonstrate their new identity in this way. Some

young people experiment with a radicalised expression as part of their identity without necessarily having the will to use violence. Such signs are not in themselves indicative of militant Islamism or the will to use violence.

### **3.2. Special social groups of significance to radicalisation**

Militant Islamist radicalisation often takes place within certain social groups where individuals can form a militant Islamist interpretation of the world and confirm each other in this interpretation without being challenged. These social groupings offer vulnerable individuals recognition, identity and motivation in the form of a coherent narrative of injustice in which the individual is often a victim. During this process, the individual experiences – maybe for the first time – to be part of a meaningful community with a clear-cut code of conduct. According to CTA's assessment, such social groups thrive in Islamist communities, conflict zones, criminal gang circles and prison communities. Furthermore, it is CTA's assessment that stays in conflict zones and/or links to criminal circles in particular may be of particular significance to the capacity of radicalised individuals to commit violence.

According to CTA's assessment, IS' proclamation of a caliphate in Syria/Iraq has accelerated militant Islamist radicalisation. As a consequence of the proclamation, militant Islamists now have a tangible cause to fight for. The appeal of the caliphate is underpinned by propaganda on social media where IS directly and with great visual care addresses its audience. It is CTA's assessment that both foreign fighters in the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq as well as returnees from the conflict zone and fighters killed in action are held in high esteem in Islamist circles and on related social media where they are recognised as role models to others. According to CTA's assessment, the presence of women in militant Islamist conflict zones is being used actively in propaganda as well, e.g. by IS. This may have an effect on other women in terms of radicalisation and recruitment.

Criminal gang circles are characterised by being violence-prone and by an extremely masculine group identity, but they are rarely politically or religiously oriented as a group. It is CTA's assessment that there are persons who, on an individual level, move among criminal gang circles and Islamist circles. For the most part, this phenomenon is due to family relations or mutual experiences dating from the individuals' upbringing in the same neighbourhood. But for some, this contact takes on the characteristics of radicalisation, so-called "crossover". This crossover may be due to the influence of militant Islamist propaganda and/or radicalisers coming from Islamist social circles, who offer gang members an alternative masculine brotherhood as well as a framework within which violence and crime is legitimate. It may take the form of individual gang

circle members starting to use militant Islamist symbols and rhetoric as identity markers or actual radicalisation where an individual uses the capacity for violence of the gang circles, including their access to weapons, to further a militant Islamist agenda.

Being affiliated with a religiously or ideologically oriented group in prison may provide inmates with certain advantages, e.g. protection, but affiliation also offers an identity and a clearly defined code of conduct. Reports from abroad indicate that prison inmates converting to Islam is a phenomenon on the rise, and that the combination of conversion and prison may increase the risk of converts ending up choosing a radical interpretation of Islam. Based on this, it is CTA's assessment that inmates in prisons may be particularly vulnerable to militant Islamist radicalisation. This is particularly true if the inmate, following his/her release from prison, becomes part of a social circle that holds a militant Islamist world view.