

DEMOS

**“Wicked” jihad and
the appeal of violent
extremism**

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Since 9/11, counter terrorism in Europe has been reactive in nature. Most of our time, resources and energies have been focused on thwarting attacks, hunting down the perpetrators, and preparing for the aftermath.

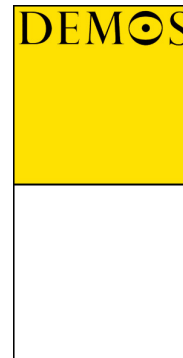
The reactive policies haven't worked. Across Western Europe authorities are worried by the growing number of young, "home grown" Muslims attracted to violent jihadi extremism¹, and there is something approaching a consensus that al-Qaeda has won the propaganda war. This realization has led to the agenda changing dramatically in the last couple of years. The focus is now increasingly on the "prevent" or "de-radicalization" strand of counter-terrorism, which aims to prevent young people being drawn into extremist ideology in the first place by lessening the appeal of violent extremism. The next phase of the war on terror is going to be about ideas. The big question now facing authorities is: how do we win it? How do we make violent extremism less appealing?

Understanding social movements of any type is notoriously difficult, but before we can hope to answer these questions we need to explore why violent jihadi extremism is attractive in the first place. That's what I want to consider in this short paper.

What do we know so far? Most work on the subject consider a number of critical issues; the broad context of social, economic and political development including Western foreign policy; personal crisis moments such as being the victim of societal racism; the identity issue; the failure of local leadership; the importance of family and friendship networks already engaged in extremist ideology.

All of this is important of course. But focusing entirely on these broad structural issues that push people into extremist movements fails to explain why some people decide *violent* not *peaceful* extremism is the way to address their grievances.

¹ The use of terminology in this area is extremely contentious. Jihad in Arabic comes from the root j-h-d, meaning "to struggle" and it can mean a non-violent struggle, or internal struggle to be a better Muslim. However, some groups consider the true meaning of jihad to be "jihad bi-Sayf" (struggle with the sword).



Extremism isn't by definition violent: John Stuart Mill and Gandhi were extremists. What these approaches don't answer is why the *violent* narratives and *violent* lifestyles offered by groups like al-Qaeda are so appealing.

At the moment the "slippery slope" analogy seems to dominate our understanding. This holds that violent jihadi extremists undergo a natural, constant progression: from moderate, to radical, to extremist and then finally to violent extremist. This is misleading: 99% of "extremists" of course reject violence entirely. More importantly, for most home grown violent jihadists accepting violence as a means of action is simultaneous with, *and sometimes even precedes*, deep involvement with extremist ideology.

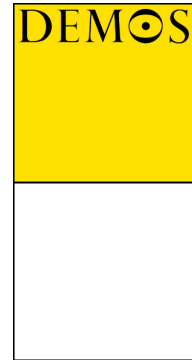
My point is this: there is something appealing about the "violent" bit of violent extremism. Albert Camus was on to something when he wrote that the sinister "excites" – violence can generate a potency and significance that we still don't quite understand.

To understand the appeal of violent extremism, therefore, we need to view violent extremists as young men, not just as Muslims. The power of violence to create excitement applies just as much to them as anyone else. Work from other areas could help. Why not learn from research done on gang culture in the US, or the reason so many young men excitedly enlisted in 1914, or even the surge in football hooliganism in the 1980s? All of these phenomena have been studied by looking at some of the more human aspects: the sense of fun, excitement, peer pressure, or street credibility.

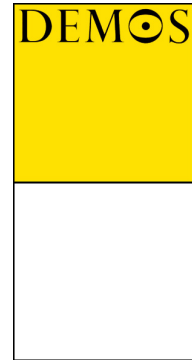
Taking this approach, I believe there are three related reasons which help explain why violent jihadi extremism appeals which have so far been ignored. They all have important implications for how we should tackle it.

Violent extremism offers a fun adventure

Mourad Benchellali, a young Frenchman from Lyon, was recently released from Guantanamo Bay, having been at an Al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. His



candid description of the camp and what led him there is revealing: he wanted to learn about guns, to test the limit of his physique, and “get close to war but without taking too many risks”. Of the camp itself, Mourad explained “no one was armed; most of them, like me, had been lured to Afghanistan by a misguided and mistimed sense of adventure.” A chilling sermon inciting young men to fight Jihad found in Parisian mosques in 2002 would have surely resonated with him: “It’s better than a holiday in Los Angeles. It’s adventure. You eat, you discover beautiful new countryside, and you also help your friends”.

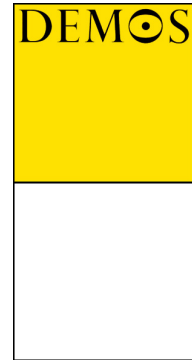


Mourad’s account is similar to the recent testimony of the young British men involved in Operation Crevice, the plot to explode fertiliser bombs in a nightclub. They also went to an al-Qaeda training camp, but were actually disappointed, “I was thinking about something with ranges and assault courses, like I’d seen on TV,” one of the group said “but it wasn’t that at all.” Things looked up, though, when a local trainer brought out some AK-47s, a light machine gun and a rocket launcher and the young men took turns to fire the weapons. “It was wicked,” one said later. Even the most impressive ideologue of Al-Qaeda, Abu Musab al-Suri, used to complain that many treated the camps as an adventure playground or as a means of cleansing themselves after having “spent time with a whore in Bangkok”.

Violent extremism makes you the hero of the story

Violent extremism offers young men the chance to transform themselves from a nobody in a run-down suburb to a heroic warrior battling dark forces in a global war on terror. Most home-grown terrorists are course secularised, often weaned on a mixed diet of traditional Islam and Western popular culture. As a result Western movie icons often serve as inspiration. Maureen Coufflard, a former APF journalist, spent years with European militant Islamists around the world and found that they style themselves as new James Bonds or Che Guevaras. The world’s most sought after internet terrorist called himself Irhaabii 007 (Irhaabii means terrorist in Arabic). Even Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the erstwhile leader of the feared Salafist Group for Combat and Predication, described himself as “half Robin Hood, half freedom fighter”.

As Olivier Roy argues “al-Qaeda is not a network, it’s a narrative in which the individual is the star”. Anyone familiar with Western popular culture would not be surprised by the story of Omar Saeed Sheikh, a young Pakistani-British international terrorist, responsible for the murder of US journalist Daniel Pearl. His fling with jihadism brought him secret phone calls, large bank transfers, flights to Bosnia, then to Kashmir. He was captured then released by Indian police, whom he fooled with his well-spoken English. He met some of the world’s most wanted men under cover of night. Is it surprising that a 19 year old might be attracted to this, rather than following his father in the Pakistani clothes merchant industry?



It gets you street cred

Ahmed Ressam was an illegal immigrant living in Montreal, spending most of his time ripping off Japanese tourists with no interest in religion. Then he realized that the most respected men in his circle of friends had all been on military training, or fought in Bosnia or Chechnya. A quest for recognition and respect among peers drove him to make the trip to a training camp too, and one year later he tried to blow up Los Angeles airport. The Canadian authorities tapping Ressam’s crew called their meetings “terrorist tupperware parties” adding that “...some of these guys were killers, and the others sat at their feet, enthralled. There were bragging rights.” Richard Reid’s journey into violent extremism was also motivated by a desire to be in the right crowd.

How to counter violent extremism

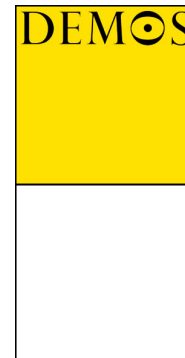
I hope these short testimonies shed some light on an important aspect of al-Qaeda’s appeal: for some young people, violent jihadi is exciting. It offers glamorous trips around the world to meet some of the world’s most infamous men, running around with an AK-47 in mysterious locations. It offers the chance to becoming a hero who wins respect and admiration amongst peers. Anyone remotely familiar with Western popular culture will find that pretty exhilarating. The images of Muktar Ibrahim, leader of the 21/7 attempted attacks, running around in the New Forest

with ten other young men shouting “Allah Akbar!!” with a big stick for a gun, makes sense. An unethical foreign policy or discrimination helps explain why extremist ideologies flourish. But it’s the excitement and glamour that can make violence the preferred response.

This brings three new insights for any agencies involved in preventing violent extremism:

Firstly, many young men go to training camps partly looking for excitement, and become radicalised there. The training camp is often the start, not the end, of serious engagement with extremist ideology. Seven out of ten European militants that go to al-Qaeda training camps return home because it is too tough, too demanding, and “not like they’d seen on TV”. But that won’t stop them boasting to impressionable friends that they traded blows with some of the world’s most infamous men. Authorities need a coherent strategy to deal with this important group. In fact, they might also be a good source of information - Ahmed Ressay, the Algerian petty criminal, is now the US’ top informant on terror networks.

Secondly, governments need to recognise the potential risk of openly supporting a liberal, ‘good’ version of Islam. For violent extremists, accommodation and compromise with the authorities is a sign of incorrect beliefs, while the act of violence is a demonstration of sincerity. Support from authorities therefore risks undermining moderate versions of the religion, turning their ideologues into “ulama as-sulta” (scholars of power), incapable of independence and sincerity. The French Union d’Organisations Islamique de France, closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, lost a lot of credibility with young radicals when it joined the official Conseil Français du Culte Muselman at Nicolas Sarkozy’s beckoning. Salafi preachers now fill the void. Moderate counter narratives are important, but support must be given in careful, subtle ways that aren’t seen as compromising independence.



Finally, governments should recognise that the appeal of violent jihadi extremism is also partly rooted in popular culture. Consider the success of violent films, books, video games, and music. Muslims with what we might consider extreme views are not really more susceptible to accept violence as a means of action as anyone else. And violent extremists are not just Muslims, they are typically young men, affected by broader social and cultural phenomena. To change this will take will more time, resources, and careful effort than we realise.

