



Radicalisation Discourse: Consensus Points, Evidence Base and Blind Spots

**Dr Simon Cottee
University of Kent**

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Executive summary

- Radicalisation has become a prolific keyword in our social and political vocabulary, yet there are ways of talking about radicalisation that have acquired a special standing and epistemic authority among elites.
- This report is concerned to examine the consensus points, evidence base and blind spots of what we can call “radicalisation discourse”: namely, the approved ways of talking about radicalisation that claim a special scientific or scholarly authority and that have become entrenched as a kind of socially sanctioned common sense embedded in academia, the media and government bureaucracy.
- Academics, journalists and policymakers speak with increasing confidence about radicalisation, its causes and its solutions, yet this report finds that much of the conventional scholarly wisdom on radicalisation lacks a proper empirical foundation and utility.
- Of the top-cited academic articles in radicalisation research, approximately a quarter (26%) are based on new empirical data. The vast majority – nearly three quarters (74%) – are almost totally reliant on secondary sources.
- Radicalisation research is dominated by studies that not only lump together different individuals, ideologies and groups but also neglect to capture the radicalisation process from the perspective of those who experience it. Furthermore, that process is typically framed in terms of distant generic pushes and pulls that short-circuit the agent altogether, so that he or she remains perennially out of focus.
- At the centre of radicalisation discourse is the “vulnerable person”, a passive figure, manipulated by shadowy extremist recruiters. There is little evidence to support this infantilising understanding of violent extremism.

Introduction

The aim of this report is to identify and critically scrutinise key points of consensus in radicalisation discourse. By “radicalisation discourse”, I mean ways of thinking and talking about radicalisation that assert (explicitly or implicitly) a special epistemic authority via an appeal to scientific rigour or practitioner experience, and that constitute a form of socially-sanctioned common sense among elites in academia, the mass media and government.¹ This distinguishes it from lay discourse on radicalisation, which may contain any number of assertions about what radicalisation is and how and why it occurs, but which makes no such appeal to scientific or scholarly rigour. Lay discourse on radicalisation need not be false or misleading or irresponsible, although it can be all of these things, and may even recycle the talking points of radicalisation discourse.²

Radicalisation discourse is embedded in certain occupational sites: academia, the media and government bureaucracy. Pre-eminent among those who shape this discourse are academics and credentialed experts with graduate degrees from academic institutions. These academics/experts come from a variety of disciplines, including political science, psychology, international relations, criminology, sociology, media studies, history and computational science, and while they differ in approach and outlook most see themselves as engaged in a search for basic scientific knowledge. Many, furthermore, believe that it is part of their public role to disseminate this knowledge to policy-makers and the wider public. This understanding of their public role is actively encouraged both by governments, which enlist them as expert advisors, and funding bodies, which support academic research. Even among academics who do not engage with government, either because their research isn't policy-relevant or because their radical politics preclude it, most seek to publicise their work by engaging directly with media, activists and community groups.

The chief aim of this report is to assess the empirical weight of radicalisation discourse. This is a matter of some social significance, since this discourse informs wider culture, shaping our ideas about what radicalisation is, how it should be understood and what ought to be done about it. It also produces broader frames of reference or conceptual apparatus for those government agencies which manage radicalisation and deradicalisation. It is therefore important to know how cogent this conceptual apparatus is and whether or not its evidence base is sound. If socially approved ways of thinking and talking about radicalisation lack clarity, coherence or empirical substance it would be useful to know this. It would also be a necessary first step in working out how to change radicalisation discourse for the better.

This report is based on an analysis of the 50 most cited academic journal articles on radicalisation and deradicalisation. Together, these articles constitute the foundations of a consolidated scholarly wisdom that both mirrors and shapes radicalisation discourse.

The report is divided into 3 parts. Part 1 provides a statistical overview of the sample of 50 journal articles. Part 2 summarises the main points of consensus across the sample, in addition to identifying notable points of contention; this section also shows how certain consensus points and the broader frames of reference that inform them are reflected in government policy, media discourse and the account-making of suspected terrorist offenders. Part 3 assesses the evidence base behind the main points of consensus, focusing on what, at present, we reliably know about radicalisation and deradicalisation, the practical utility of this knowledge and the blind spots that hamper our understanding. The conclusion spells out the implications of this analysis for both academics and policy-makers.

Background

Before commencing Part 1, it is necessary to briefly contextualise this report by placing it against the background of other reports on scholarly knowledge about terrorism and radicalisation. Broadly speaking, these reports can be divided into two genres: *stern and disheartened* and *favourable and optimistic*.

Stern and disheartened

Many reports lament the lack of a sound empirical foundation in terrorism studies. Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, reviewing some 6,000 works published on terrorism between 1968 and 1988, in addition to interviewing over 50 researchers in the field, estimated that as much as 80% of the literature was not “research-based in any rigorous sense”.³ They concluded that “there are probably few areas in the social science literature in which so much is written on the basis of so little research.”⁴ Andrew Silke, writing over a decade and a half later in 2004, observed that not that much had changed in the interim: “The period following Schmid and Jongman’s survey”, he wrote, “has not seen a vast improvement in the situation.”⁵ While he acknowledged that research on terrorism was relatively good at answering questions as to the “who, when and where” of terrorism, it had made little headway in enlarging our understanding of actual terrorists, particularly their motives and activities.⁶

Had the situation improved a decade later? According to Marc Sageman, it had not; indeed terrorism research had “stagnated”. This, Sageman argued, was largely due to an unwillingness of the intelligence community to share primary data with academics. Surveying the terrorism research landscape post 9/11, he complained that the “field was dominated by laymen...and self-proclaimed media experts” who “are not versed in the scientific method, and often pursue a political agenda”.⁷ He was particularly critical of research that adopted “a top-down paradigm of terrorism, assuming that sophisticated leaders at the top somehow prompted naïve subjects to carry out their intentions”.⁸ He was no less critical of the leading theories of radicalisation associated with the work of Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt⁹ and Quintan Wiktorowicz.¹⁰ Referring to Silber and Bhatt’s 2007 study, he wrote, “The NYPD postulated four stages of the [radicalisation] process, but these were vague, simplistic, and did not stand up to close empirical scrutiny”.¹¹ Wiktorowicz’s notion of a “cognitive opening”, in his view, was similarly empirically thin and had yet to be properly validated. And while he praised McCauley and Moskalkenko’s work,¹² he regretted that the “mechanisms of radicalization” delineated in it are “based on very schematic

biographies of nineteenth-century Russian militants and selective confirmatory evidence from global neo-jihadi terrorism".¹³ "After all this funding and this flurry of publications", he concluded, "we are no closer to answering our original question about what leads people to turn to political violence".¹⁴

Favourable and optimistic

Sageman's critique engendered a minor controversy within terrorism studies. This was in part due to the imperious and caustic tone in which it was written. But it was also because many terrorism studies scholars thought that Sageman's assessment was one-sided and unduly negative. Jessica Stern, for example, insisted that there "are many shining examples of work being done by relative newcomers to the field, including those apparently drawn to the field after 9/11 (whom Dr Sageman seems to single out with particular disdain)".¹⁵ By way of substantiation, she named and cited the research of several such newcomers. Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko similarly sought to argue that, despite "significant impediments", terrorism studies has progressed in important ways since 9/11. They went on to cite and discuss their own research as evidence of this progress.¹⁶ Likewise, Alex P. Schmid, now striking a very different tone from that of his pessimistic 1988 survey with Jongman, wrote that "the quality of research on terrorism has greatly improved in the last decade compared to the three decades before 9/11".¹⁷ Andrew Silke similarly struck a more optimistic note in his 2017 survey, co-authored with Jennifer Schmidt-Petersen. They found that the 100 most cited articles in terrorism studies "were more likely to be the result of collaborative research and were also more likely to provide new data".¹⁸ Concluding, they wrote that "far from being stagnant or moribund, terrorism studies is arguably enjoying a golden age".¹⁹

Bart Schuurman's recent survey on terrorism research draws a similar conclusion. Using a sample of 3,442 academic articles published in leading journals on terrorism between 2007 and 2016, he found that "the use of primary data has increased considerably", while "the overreliance on literature reviews that was noted from the 1980s through to the early 2000s" has diminished.²⁰ "Overall", he concluded, the field of terrorism studies appears to have made "considerable progress".²¹

Surveying radicalisation

This report contributes to the broader literature on the state of terrorism research, but unlike the surveys discussed above its focus is specifically on radicalisation research. In this, it builds on Peter Neumann and Scott Kleinmann's survey on radicalisation research, which found "clusters of excellence" but also documented "some of the same problems that afflict the wider field of terrorism studies".²² However, the analysis set out below differs from previous surveys, including that of Neumann and Kleinmann's, in that it offers a qualitative account of radicalisation research, focusing on key points of consensus and the underlying assumptions behind them. In addition to this, it sketches out some of the wider discursive landscape in which these consensus points have surfaced or taken root.

The emergence of radicalisation talk

“Radicalization”, wrote Peter Neumann and Scott Kleinmann in their 2013 survey, “is one of the great buzzwords of our time”.²³ Today, some ten years later, the term is now so prevalent in public discourse that it has come to mean everything and nothing. A glance at recent news stories reveals that ever greater numbers of people have become, or are becoming, radicalised. Indeed, in the United States, whole swathes of the population have become radicalised, according to *Politico*. Referring to the 6 January attack on the US Capitol by supporters of President Donald Trump, Zack Stanton wrote, “The pathway to an attempted government overthrow unfolded in public, out loud on the internet, in a process that experts call mass radicalization”.²⁴ A report in *The Independent* – quoting Democratic Congresswoman Rep. Judy Chu – suggested that those who stormed the Capitol were “radicalised by the president”,²⁵ while *Newsweek* speculated that Trump *himself* had been radicalised: apparently by Fox News.²⁶ According to *The Week*, in an article titled “How Trump is radicalizing the left”, Trump had managed to radicalise not only those on his own side, but also those on the other.²⁷

In other news stories, the focus is on how young people have become radicalised: not by Trump, but by spending too much time online due to government lockdowns. “Covid pandemic helped extremists ‘to radicalise young people’”, warned the *Evening Standard* in a story²⁸ that was virtually identical to one that had been published a year earlier by the BBC on how children “could return to school radicalised” after being “exposed to more extremist material on social media during lockdown”.²⁹ In a twist on the COVID-19 radicalisation nexus, Paul Mason, writing in *The New Statesman*, claimed that the critics of COVID-19 lockdowns had been radicalised.³⁰ At the time of writing, the *Mirror* warns of the “rising threat from young right-wing terrorists radicalised in their bedrooms”,³¹ using the same trope as earlier stories on how Shamima Begum, Amira Abase and Kadiza Sultana had been “radicalised in their bedrooms” prior to travelling to Syria in February 2015.³²

But more than just a buzzword bandied about by journalists and polemicists, the term radicalisation has become inscribed into the official apparatus of government discourse and practices. In Britain, for example, the Prevent Strategy is explicitly framed as a counter-radicalisation programme that seeks to stop people from becoming radicalised by extremist ideologies.³³ At the same time, radicalisation has emerged as the focal-point of an entire academic subfield, where scholars endeavour to research and conceptualise its pathways, milieus, networks, narratives and counter-narratives. It has also become the focus of so-called “CVE”³⁴ companies, whose aim is to track and map extremism threats and market digital counter-extremism tools to both governments and private social media companies.

“Radicalisation talk” is today so common that it’s easy to forget just how recent it is. Prior to the September 11 attacks, 2001, it simply didn’t exist. “As late as the early 2000’s,” Peter Neumann wrote, “hardly any reference to radicalisation could be found in the academic literature on terrorism and political violence.”³⁵ Indeed, it was not until at least 2006, with the publication of Thomas Hegghammer’s paper on jihadi militants in Saudi Arabia (see Item 26, Appendix), that scholars started to systematically use the term (without necessarily defining it or its scope).³⁶ They did so, Neumann contends, because it offered a new way of talking about the “roots” of terrorism that seemingly didn’t blame the victims or excuse the perpetrators.³⁷

Before the September 11 attacks, terrorism scholars saw their specialist academic enterprise as one concerned to understand terrorist groups, their grievances, demands, propaganda, membership profiles, sources of support and threat-level. But in the months and years after the attacks, their focus began to shift and widen to include the processes by which people join terrorist (or terrorist-adjacent) groups. This interest in turn reflected and was incentivised by the interest of governments in better understanding these processes so that they could develop strategies for hampering them and stopping people from becoming terrorists in the first place. The 7 July London bombings in 2005 provided further impetus to the concept of radicalisation, such was the collective need in the UK to better understand how the four British citizens who orchestrated the attacks could have become so murderously opposed to the country they lived and grew up in.³⁸

Methodological note

The aim of this report is to map and evaluate radicalisation discourse. To do so, it draws on a sample of the 50 most cited academic articles on radicalisation and deradicalisation. Combined, these articles can reasonably be said to provide the building-blocks for conventional scholarly/expert wisdom on radicalisation and deradicalisation.

In ranking the articles, I used Google Scholar, an online searchable database that contains bibliographic information and citation details on scholarly works across multiple disciplines. First introduced in 2004, Google Scholar is the primary citation database in many academic fields.³⁹ To identify the articles, I searched for the following terms in the Google Scholar database: “radicalisation”, “radicalization”, “deradicalisation” and “deradicalization”. Among the items returned were several well-cited books, but I excluded these, since they were not academic articles and had not gone through the sort of peer-review process required by academic journals; many of these books were in any case based on peer-reviewed research published in earlier academic articles that were among the 50 most cited articles I had ranked. The vast majority of the articles in the sample not merely contained the word “radicalisation”, etc. but had radicalisation or deradicalisation as their primary point of explanatory focus.

I began this process in early December 2022 and had completed it by the end of that month. On 4 January 2023, I double-checked the citation count for all of the articles, adjusting and updating where necessary.

The following data was recorded per article: title of article, year of publication, number of citations, citation ranking, number of authors, name of journal, type of article (original or literature review), type of primary data, where applicable (quantitative or qualitative), whether any interviews were undertaken, whether the article was focused on radicalisation or deradicalisation or both, country focus of the article (if specified), ideology focus of the article (if specified), and DOI identifier.⁴⁰ Once collected, the data was transferred to a Microsoft Excel document in order to conduct a straightforward descriptive statistical analysis.

Regarding *type of article*, I used two principal categories: *original research* (OR) and *literature review* (LR). OR is an article based on new/primary data, whereas LR is an article

that draws on pre-existing/secondary sources (such as academic articles or news reports).⁴¹ In sorting the 50 articles into types, I employed a narrow inclusion threshold for OR: to count, the article must have been based *wholly or substantially* on new/primary data; for example, a theory-driven article that merely quoted a paragraph or two from the manifesto or memoir of a terrorist would not count.⁴² By sorting the articles into OR and LR I did not intend to produce a ranking of excellence; LR articles can be enormously valuable in terms of synthesising previous studies or developing new ways of thinking and theorising, while OR by itself is scarcely a guarantee of rigour and methodological transparency. My aim, rather, was simply to find out what proportion of the 50 articles was based on new empirical research.

1. Statistical overview of the sample

The list of the 50 most cited articles is provided in the Appendix. The highest ranked article was cited 1,676 times, the 50th article 110 times. The articles were published between 2006 and 2020.

Type of article

Thirteen (26%) of the articles are original research (OR); that is, they are based wholly or substantially on new empirical data. The vast majority – 37 (74%) – are literature review (LR); that is, they draw in the main on secondary sources. In other words, most of the top-cited academic articles on radicalisation/deradicalisation do not produce substantively new knowledge, but instead lean on data produced by others.

	Count	%
Literature review (LR)	37	74%
Original research (OR)	13	26%

Of the LR articles, the majority are theoretically oriented pieces that use or synthesise previous scholarship on, or knowledge of, political violence to develop a model of the radicalisation process. Two are short introductions to special issues on processes of radicalisation and deradicalisation,⁴³ three are reports on research on terrorism and radicalisation, much like this current paper,⁴⁴ and a further three – two of which are among the top 10 cited articles – are discursive pieces that grapple with the problem of defining radicalisation.⁴⁵ Strikingly, of the top 10 most cited articles in the sample, 9 are LR, including the highest ranked paper.

The high percentage of LR articles in the sample is somewhat at odds with the findings from recent surveys on terrorism studies: Silke and Schmidt-Petersen found that 47% of their sample of 100 articles “provided fresh data which was previously unavailable”,⁴⁶ while Schuurman’s survey reported that 53.8% of 2,552 selected articles “used some kind of primary sources”.⁴⁷ This discrepancy is probably due to these two studies counting any use of new/primary data, however limited or thin, as original research.

According to Neumann and Kleinmann’s survey on radicalisation research, “the overall balance between primary and secondary sources” was 54% versus 45% percent, respectively.⁴⁸ This current report paints a much more sobering picture, with the balance between primary and secondary sources firmly favouring the latter. One possible reason for such a divergent finding is that every article in Neumann and Kleinmann’s sample had, in the words of the authors, made “claims for empirical research”,⁴⁹ so one would expect a higher percentage of those articles to use primary sources.

Thus, on the crucial matter of new empirical data, this report is more “stern and disheartened” than “favourable and optimistic” (see “Background” above, pp. 4–5).

Publisher

Regarding the 13 OR articles in the sample, 7 were published in well-established, highly rated academic journals: *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *International Affairs*, *Political Psychology*, and *Middle East Policy*. One article was published in *The Journal for Deradicalization*, an open-access online journal established in 2014. The remaining 5 articles were not published in academic journals and presumably did not undergo anonymised peer review: one was published by a US City Police Department, another in a conference proceedings report, and three were published by think tanks: Rand Europe, Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation. By contrast, all the LR articles, with the exception of one,⁵⁰ were published in peer-reviewed academic journals.

Primary focus

Of the OR articles, nearly all have radicalisation as the main point of focus.⁵¹ This trend broadly holds for the LR articles. Seven LR articles can be said to have a dual-focus, addressing both radicalisation and deradicalisation, while none of the 13 OR articles have such a dual-focus. Of the total sample of 50 articles, only 4 focus entirely on deradicalisation.⁵² This suggests that deradicalisation is a somewhat peripheral interest in radicalisation research.

	Radicalisation only (count)	Deradicalisation only (count)	Both (count)
Literature review (LR)	27	3	7
Original research (OR)	12	1	0

Authorship

Over half (52%) of the articles were produced by a single author, while the remainder (48%) were team efforts. This is broadly in line with Silke and Schmidt-Petersen’s finding that more than half (54) of the 100 most cited articles in terrorism studies were produced by multiple authors.⁵³

85% of OR articles were produced by two or more authors, whereas for LR articles that figure is substantially lower – 35%. Given that the process of collecting new empirical data can often be time-consuming and demanding, it isn't surprising that the majority of OR articles are produced by multiple collaborators.

	Total count	Single author	Two or more authors
Entire sample	50	26 52%	24 48%
Literature Review (LR)	37	24 65%	13 35%
Original Research (OR)	13	2 15%	11 85%

This is at variance with Neumann and Kleinmann's data on this point: of the 260 publications in their sample, 75% were single-authored, compared to 25% that were collaborative.⁵⁴ One possible explanation for this difference is that highly cited articles in all areas of academic endeavour tend to be collaborative works.⁵⁵ In a survey of the top 50 most cited articles on radicalisation/deradicalisation one would expect to see a good number of collaborative projects.

Ideology focus

Regarding the ideology focus of the 50 articles, a significant number are focused on jihadi/Islamist radicalisation; only a handful address far-right radicalisation. In judging whether an article is focused on a particular ideology or not, I used a fairly narrow benchmark: the article had to be primarily about that ideology; hence an ideology that was briefly mentioned or received 1 or 2 pages of discussion would not warrant inclusion. Of the LR articles, 38% focus on jihadi/Islamist radicalisation; none focus on the far right. An even greater number – 54% – have no primary point of focus in terms of ideology. Of the OR articles, over half – 54% – focus on jihadi/Islamist radicalisation, compared to 8% that focus on the far right, with a further 8% focusing on both far right and jihadi/Islamist radicalisation simultaneously. Only 31% of OR articles have no primary point of focus in terms of ideology.

	Total count	Far right	Jihadi	Jihadi and far right	Not specified	N/A
Entire sample	50	1 2%	21 42%	1 2%	24 48%	3 6%
Literature review (LR)	37	0 0%	14 38%	0 0%	20 54%	3 8%
Original research (OR)	13	1 8%	7 54%	1 8%	4 31%	0 0%

The **dominant** focus on jihadi/Islamist radicalisation is perhaps unsurprising, given that the jihadi threat has until recently been the primary concern of radicalisation scholars and

terrorism studies more broadly.⁵⁶ It's also important to note that while the far right has attracted more attention in radicalisation research since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the number of citations for this work, given how new it is, remains modest. (One can expect a significant surge in citation counts for this work over the next 5 years.)

Country focus

In respect to country-focus, only 3 (8%) of LR articles have an explicit country focus, whereas the OR articles, unsurprisingly, tend to be narrower in scope: 9 (69%) have an explicit country-focus. Among the countries specified in the OR group, western ones predominate (particularly the UK and US).

Type of data

Regarding the type of data used by the OR articles, 5 relied exclusively on qualitative material, while 4 relied exclusively on quantitative material. The remaining 4 used a combination of both.

	Total count	Qualitative data only	Quantitative data only	Both
Original research (OR)	13	5	4	4

A total of 5 articles conducted qualitative interviews in some form or other.⁵⁷ Among the interviewees were counter-terrorism practitioners, government officials, police officers, friends or acquaintances of terrorist offenders and former right-wing extremists. Only one article draws on original interviews with terrorist offenders.⁵⁸ The under-utilisation of interviewing as a method in radicalisation research was also noted by Neumann and Kleinmann and Schuurman in their surveys.⁵⁹

2. Consensus points in radicalisation research

There is no academic consensus on how to define the concept of radicalisation.⁶⁰ Like the term “terrorism”, radicalisation means many different things to many different scholars. In a comprehensive review of the academic literature on radicalisation and deradicalisation,⁶¹ Alex P. Schmid quotes from a range of academic papers that provide a definition of radicalisation. It would be tedious to reproduce these quotes in full, of which there are 13.⁶² Instead, I shall simply list the emphases or priorities of the definitions proffered: 1: “personal development”, “militant Islamist”; 2: “views and ideas”, “legitimisation of political violence”; 3: “process of personal development whereby an individual adopts ever more extreme political or religious ideas and goals”; 4: “a process of de-legitimation”, “alienation”; 5: “ideological and/or behavioural transformations”, “rejection of democratic principles”; 6: “violent strategies”; 7: “direct action”; 8: “commitment to extremist political or religious ideology”; 9: “unorthodox means”; 10: “extremism in... thinking, sentiments and/or behaviour”; 11: “patterns of connectivity”, “the enactment of violence”; 12: “extremist ideologies”; 13: “radical change”, “legitimisation of political violence”.

What is striking about these emphases is how wildly divergent they are: while some definitions focus on the individual as the object of radicalisation, others focus on the group; and while some foreground extreme ideas, others foreground extreme action.⁶³ None are particularly clear on what extremism means, although two imply that it involves the rejection of democratic principles. Schmid, for his part, attempts to offer some conceptual clarity by offering a definition of his own, but it is far too elaborate to be particularly useful.⁶⁴ Neumann's preferred definition of radicalisation – "the process whereby people become extremists"⁶⁵ - has the advantage of being both concise and intuitively convincing, but he too neglects to clarify exactly what he means by "extremism".

Yet for all this confusion and disagreement over radicalisation as a concept, it is possible to discern the outline of an emergent scholarly consensus on key aspects of the phenomenon itself. Below, I describe this consensus, drawing on the sample of 50 articles discussed in the previous section. The consensus, I suggest, rests on five pillars.

The first pillar of the consensus holds that radicalisation is a process. Far from being the product of a single choice, much less the result of some psychological abnormality, radicalisation is the culmination of a multitude of choices over a period of time. Thus Schmid writes, "Radicalisation is usually a gradual, phased process" with "an incubation period" that "often lasts months and usually years".⁶⁶ Neumann similarly observes that "no one who studies radicalisation believes that individuals turn into extremists overnight".⁶⁷ This, he says, "is not particularly controversial".⁶⁸ Indeed, and as Neumann goes on to point out, all of the major theories of radicalisation, despite their substantive differences and varying metaphorical preferences, broadly conceptualise it as a cumulative process that can be divided into stages or phases (whether distinct or overlapping).⁶⁹ Among the several examples Neumann cites is the work of McCauley and Moskaleiko, which asserts that "typically an individual's progress into a terrorist group is slow and gradual".⁷⁰

The second pillar of the consensus stipulates that the person who undergoes the radicalisation process is a psychologically normal individual and that *anyone*, potentially, can go through a process of radicalisation. Radicalisation scholars frequently point out that researchers who have looked for pathological traits in the minds of terrorists have found none.⁷¹ "Attempts to profile terrorists have failed resoundingly", writes John Horgan,⁷² who warns against the tendency to see involvement in terrorism as "indicative of some [psychological] state or condition".⁷³ According to Horgan, "individual personality factors in themselves are neither useful nor predictive" for thinking about individual involvement in terrorism.⁷⁴ Bertjan Doosje *et al* articulate the point in even starker terms: "terrorists are not 'crazy' and maybe 'there is a terrorist hidden in everyone'".⁷⁵ Neumann and Kleinmann, quoting from the work of Jerold M. Post,⁷⁶ simply treat it as axiomatic that "terrorists are neither 'mad' nor 'crazy' but 'psychologically normal in the sense of not being clinically psychotic'".⁷⁷ Indeed, they list this axiom as one of the main "discoveries" that "formed the basis for the research on radicalisation".⁷⁸

The third pillar of the consensus grants that while just about anyone can go through the process of radicalization, some individuals are more susceptible or prone to it than others. These individuals are characterized as "vulnerable" in some way. Horgan, for example, identifies "emotional vulnerability" as the first of 6 "predisposing risk factors" that, when

combined, open a pathway toward terrorism.⁷⁹ Emotional vulnerability, he suggests, relates to “feelings of anger, alienation (often synonymous with feelings of being culturally uprooted or displaced and a longing for a sense of community) and disenfranchisement”.⁸⁰ By way of example, he invokes the figure of the deracinated western (specifically British) Muslim “looking for guidance and leadership that they do not get from mosque leaders because of a perception that the leaders are too old, too conservative and out of touch with their world...”⁸¹ Horgan doesn’t quite come out and say it, but the implication is that some young western Muslims, due to their lack of political capital, rootedness and resilience, are open to manipulation or mind-control by extremists.⁸² Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt are more explicit on the matter:

Europe’s failure to integrate the 2nd and 3rd generation of its immigrants into society, both economically and socially, has left many young Muslims torn between the secular West and their religious heritage. This inner conflict makes them especially vulnerable to extremism – the radical views, philosophy and rhetoric that is highly advertised and becoming more and more fashionable among young Muslims in the West.⁸³

According to Silber and Bhatt, violent extremists prey on this vulnerability, seeking to indoctrinate naïve Muslims into their way of thinking. Silber and Bhatt refer to this as the “indoctrination stage”, where a central role is played by the “spiritual sanctioner”, who instils in the curious acolyte “the ‘Us-versus-Them/War on Islam’ worldview” that “provides the moral justification for jihad”.⁸⁴

While some scholars have taken issue with Silber and Bhatt’s work, particularly on account of its “linear” account of radicalisation,⁸⁵ the idea that *some* people, on account of certain deficits or strains they experience, are more prone to radicalisation than others, as though radicalisation is some kind of infectious disease that disproportionately targets the vulnerable, is ingrained in the thinking of many radicalisation scholars.⁸⁶ The converse idea – that, as Doosje *et al* put it, “people are able to resist the temptations of a radical ideology to the extent that they have a strong shield of resilience”⁸⁷ – is similarly widely shared among these scholars.

Even when the individual at the centre of the radicalisation process isn’t explicitly framed as “vulnerable” in some way or another, they are often portrayed as a passive agent who is *propelled* toward violent extremism. This is coded in the deterministic metaphors commonly used by scholars to describe how people become radicalised: they are “driven”, “led”, “lured”, “moved”, “recruited”, “pushed”, “pulled”. The last two terms recur with particular frequency in scholarly discussion of radicalisation. Indeed, many scholars classify the causal antecedents of radicalisation (and terrorism) very precisely in terms of “pushes” and “pulls”.⁸⁸ While the former refers to the grievance-related repulsions that *drive* people away from their current situation and into the arms of extremists,⁸⁹ the latter refers to the positive features of extremist groups (identity, belonging, drama, action etc.) that *lure* them towards these groups.⁹⁰ Although scholars differ in how they conceptualise “pushes” and “pulls”, the overwhelming impression given in many discussions is of a process in which the radicalised person resembles a billiard ball that is knocked around by others, more acted

upon than acting. As Kevin McDonald observes, “the problem with these approaches is the extent they consider radicalisation to be something *done to a person*”.⁹¹

The fourth pillar of the consensus decrees that the radicalisation process is complex and multifaceted. Thus, Horgan writes that “involvement in terrorism is a complex process of accommodation and assimilation across incrementally experienced stages”.⁹² McCauley and Moskalenko likewise contend that “there are multiple and diverse pathways leading individuals and groups to radicalisation and terrorism”.⁹³ Schmid, summarising the “micro, meso and macro-levels” of radicalisation research, refers to “a complex mix of internal and external pull and push factors, triggers and drivers that can lead to radicalisation of individuals and even turn large collective groups into radical milieus and violent extremists.”⁹⁴

Where radicalisation scholars differ, and differ sharply and even acrimoniously, is in how much weight they assign to each element in the “complex mix” of factors that explain radicalisation. A particular bone of contention concerns the role of ideology. Broadly speaking, there are two warring sides, with one – Team Neumann - attributing maximum causal weight to ideology or extremist beliefs and the other – Team Horgan - emphasising the centrality of social networks and other non-ideological factors. Horgan, for example, points to “evidence that not all those who engage in violent behaviour necessarily need to possess radical beliefs”, adding: “A lingering question in terrorism studies is whether violent beliefs precede violent action, and it seems to be the case that while they often do, it is not always the case.”⁹⁵ “In fact”, he elaborates, “the emerging picture from empirical studies of terrorists...is repeatedly one of people who became gradually involved with a terrorist network, largely through friends, family connections, and other informal social pathways but who only began to acquire and express radical beliefs as a consequence of deepening involvement with a network.”⁹⁶ Randy Borum similarly rejects the view that, as he expresses it, radical beliefs are “a necessary precursor” for terrorism.⁹⁷ Borum indeed claims that “many terrorists – even those who lay claim to a ‘cause’ – are not deeply ideological...”⁹⁸ Neumann, in response, argues that “it is impossible to separate political beliefs from political action, and that attempting to do so obstructs a holistic understanding of radicalisation”.⁹⁹ “In reality”, he writes, “the role of beliefs and ideology in behavioural radicalisation is obvious and well documented.”¹⁰⁰

The fifth pillar of the consensus is that radicalisation is not a one-way street¹⁰¹ and that government-led or sponsored efforts to deradicalise individuals or to bring about their disengagement from extremist activity can be effective for some and should be supported.¹⁰²

Research on deradicalisation (i.e. renouncing extremist beliefs) and “disengagement” (i.e. desisting from extremist activity) is still in its infancy.¹⁰³ Yet scholars are in broad agreement that, just like radicalisation, deradicalisation and disengagement processes are complex and shaped by multiple factors,¹⁰⁴ and that people can, as Donatella della Porta and Gary LaFree put it, “disengage from violence or leave violent groups but retain ‘radical’ beliefs and attitudes”.¹⁰⁵

A further point of agreement is that former violent extremists can play an effective role in helping people walk away from violent extremism, providing them with the necessary guidance to become more “resilient” against the lures of violent extremism. The implicit assumption here is that radicalised individuals, being “vulnerable”, have been misled or misinformed and can be brought to recognise this by *credible*¹⁰⁶ mentors. (These mentors are essentially the inverse of the “spiritual sanctioner” described by Silber and Bhatt.) John Horgan and Mary Beth Altier, for example, remark that “ultimately, disengaged terrorists themselves may be the most potent force in pre-empting engagement among prospective recruits”.¹⁰⁷ Horgan has also argued that former extremists have an important role to play in “counter-messaging”, advising that “it would be beneficial to encourage those who have disengaged from terrorist activity to become more vocal in dispelling the attractions and lures of involvement in movements”.¹⁰⁸ “Although it might seem that such counter-propaganda would be ignored by the deeply committed”, he clarifies, “the messages may have a real impact on those at the initial stages of involvement”.¹⁰⁹

The wider discursive landscape

Together, the above consensus points constitute a kind of prestige wisdom that reverberates well beyond academia, shaping the discourse of politicians, policymakers, journalists and even former members of violent extremist groups and the activists and lawyers who advocate for them.

In the British context, for example, the notion that violent extremism is a type of “risk” that disproportionately afflicts the “vulnerable” was, until very recently,¹¹⁰ a central lynchpin of the UK government’s Prevent Strategy. In page after page of official government documents on Prevent, the radicalisation process is framed in terms of “risk” and “vulnerability”. In one document, which provides statutory guidance for the relevant authorities listed in the 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, the word “risk” appears 67 times.¹¹¹ In all cases, the risk in question relates to the “risk of individuals being drawn into terrorism.” The word “vulnerable”, defined by the statutory guidance as “the condition of being capable of being injured; difficult to defend; open to moral or ideological attack”, appears 17 times.¹¹² Accordingly, Prevent’s core mission is “to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure that they are given *appropriate advice and support*”.¹¹³ Within this “safeguarding” frame of interpretation, radicalisation is primarily characterised as a symptom of personal trouble that requires expert-managed interventions to help steer disturbed individuals away from extremist ideology. According to this line of thinking, just as these individuals were steered *into* extremism by bad, ill-informed actors, they can be steered *out* of it by good, well-informed actors. This in turn implies that those who undergo the radicalisation process are not active agents engaged in politics, ideological fervour and resistance, but rather pathetic and pitiable individuals who have succumbed to the lure of bad ideas.

The medicalised language of vulnerability also underpins a great deal of media coverage and commentary on violent extremism and radicalisation. It was certainly the dominant frame in many news stories on western ISIS recruits, where the focus was on how these supposedly naïve and impressionable individuals had fallen victim to “slick” propaganda or sinister recruiters from afar.¹¹⁴ Jack Letts, a British-born Canadian Muslim convert who travelled to

Syria to join ISIS aged 19, was “brainwashed”, according to the *Daily Mail*.¹¹⁵ The paper speculated that “a shadowy figure of East African extraction” sent Letts on “his destructive path”. This “malevolent Islamist whose mission is to seek out vulnerable young men, spirit them away from the mosques and corrupt them with his hate-filled ideology” had apparently found the perfect target in “naive and directionless” Letts.¹¹⁶ Aqsa Mahmood, who travelled to Syria in 2013, was similarly “brainwashed”, according to the *The Independent*, which, like many other papers, quoted extensively from an interview with Mahmood’s parents. “Our daughter is brainwashed and deluded”, Mahmood’s mother, Khalida, told a press conference in September 2014.¹¹⁷ Seventeen-year-old Talha Asmal, who carried out a suicide bombing in Iraq in 2015, killing 11, was portrayed in similar terms in press coverage. A story by the BBC, for example, described Asmal, from West Yorkshire, as “particularly vulnerable”.¹¹⁸

Vulnerability was also the central motif in much of the coverage of the East London ISIS runaways Begum, Sultana and Abase. According to *The Daily Mail*, the girls had been “ruthlessly groomed online” and were “brainwashed in their bedrooms.”¹¹⁹ *The Guardian* and *Newsweek* ran similar stories on how the three girls had been “groomed”¹²⁰ and “led astray”.¹²¹ In none of these reports was anyone identified as a “groomer”, but this didn’t seem to derail the narrative of demonic groomers preying on the innocent. This seemed to have a gendered aspect to it: there was no suggestion in the wider media coverage that men and boys had been “groomed” by charismatic female ISIS recruiters who were preying on their emotional weaknesses and naivety.¹²² Rather, the explanatory focus was on how they had been “brainwashed” by skilful (male) religious rhetoricians who exploited supposed loopholes and gaps in their religious knowledge.¹²³ Either way, both types of account-making served to diminish the agency of the ISIS recruits, male or female.

Given that brainwashing, grooming and vulnerability tropes serve to minimise the role of agency in the radicalisation process, it is not surprising that terrorist offenders would use these very same tropes for the purpose of minimizing their individual culpability in joining a terrorist group. Begum, for example, now claims that she was “brainwashed” by ISIS. “I came here believing everything that I had been told, while knowing little about the truths of my religion”, she told Anthony Loyd in March 2019.¹²⁴ She recalled that in Britain, just before she left for Syria, she had felt “slightly depressed...I didn’t have a lot of friends. I wasn’t really connected with my family. I couldn’t speak about any problems I had so it was easy to manipulate me...”¹²⁵ Tasnime Akunjee, the lawyer representing Begum’s family, has pushed the same rhetorical line, arguing that Begum had been “groomed” by predatory online ISIS recruiters and that the British government should have done more to protect her from this.¹²⁶

Hoda Muthana, who was born in the U.S. and joined ISIS in November 2014, has similarly insisted that she made a “big mistake” in going to Syria and had misunderstood her faith. “I was brainwashed once and my friends are still brainwashed”, she told *The Guardian* in February 2019.¹²⁷ Tooba Gondal, who went to Syria in early 2015 and became a prolific ISIS recruiter and propagandist,¹²⁸ likewise presents herself as a duped victim. “I was a vulnerable target to ISIS recruiters”, she wrote in an open letter addressed to the British public (though born in France, Gondal spent most of her life in London).¹²⁹ “I was manipulated and persuaded that it was an obligation as a Muslim to travel to Syria.”¹³⁰ Both

Begum¹³¹ and Gondal have offered to help other girls vulnerable to the risks of extremism. “I offer to help prevent vulnerable Muslims from being targeted and radicalised”, Gondal has said.¹³²

It is an unfortunate paradox that, by legitimising the language of vulnerability in its official discourse on radicalisation, the UK government has in effect provided an exculpatory rhetoric for people who willingly and enthusiastically joined a violent political movement which directed, incited and inspired murderous attacks against British and countless other civilians in Iraq, Syria, Britain and many other countries. The Independent Review of Prevent, published in February 2023, explicitly acknowledges this problem, conceding that the language of vulnerability in the context of terrorism and national security “unwittingly bestows a status of victimhood on all who come into contact with Prevent, negating individual agency or risk”.¹³³ William Shawcross, who authored the review, has recommended that the government should “Move away from ‘vulnerability’ language and towards ‘susceptibility’”.¹³⁴

3. Evidence base, blind spots and practical utility

How empirically solid is radicalisation discourse? From the perspective of the sample of the top-cited articles on radicalisation/deradicalisation, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the evidence base looks very weak indeed. Of the 50 top-cited articles, only 13 are based on original research (OR). And even among this small number of empirically driven articles, the research varies markedly in thematic focus, scope and rigour.

One article, for example, used questionnaires to survey hundreds of individuals from the US and Ukraine,¹³⁵ while another drew on several years of intense qualitative fieldwork in Saudi Arabia.¹³⁶

Several OR articles lack methodological transparency. One, for example, while drawing on a good number of interviews with “non-violent radicals”, says little about the sourcing for the 61 “in-depth profiles of ‘homegrown’ terrorists” against which the non-violent radicals are compared.¹³⁷ These profiles were based on a diverse range of material, including several anonymised interviews with “experts”,¹³⁸ an article from the *Daily Mail*¹³⁹ and a book called *Desperately Seeking Paradise* by Ziauddin Sardar.¹⁴⁰ Silber and Bhatt’s 2007 study, which is ranked 4th in the top 50 most cited articles and classified as OR, is even less transparent on the matter of research methodology, devoting just half a page out of a total of 90 to it.¹⁴¹ “In researching these case studies”, Silber and Bhatt write, referring to terrorist attacks/cells in Madrid, Amsterdam, London, Sydney and Toronto, “the NYPD dispatched detectives and analysts to meet with law enforcement, intelligence officials and academics at each of these locations to enhance our understanding [of] the specifics of these events as well as the phenomenon of homegrown radicalisation”.¹⁴² Silber and Bhatt say nothing about what happened in these meetings, how they proceeded and who attended them, nor is any interview material presented from them.

A further two OR articles used extremely small samples: one, which explores Internet radicalisation, drew on interview material with 15 individuals, including 9 convicted of

terrorist offences in the UK,¹⁴³ while another, which also focuses on Internet radicalisation, conducted interviews with 8 German former far-right extremists.¹⁴⁴

It is perhaps necessary before proceeding further to clarify that none of the above is to deny that a good number of the top 50 most cited articles ranked for this report have made important and lasting contributions to radicalisation research. And it would be mistaken to infer too much about an entire academic sub-field on the basis of a sample as small as 50 journal articles. Indeed, there are many articles and books on radicalisation that, though not included in the sample of articles ranked for this report, greatly enrich our empirical knowledge and understanding of radicalisation and deradicalisation.¹⁴⁵ However, the fundamental point still stands: much of the consolidated scholarly wisdom on radicalisation/deradicalisation lacks a secure empirical footing. Given that radicalisation is a relatively new area of research and given how difficult it is to gain access to radicalised individuals, this state of affairs is perhaps not surprising nor should it be particularly controversial to point it out.

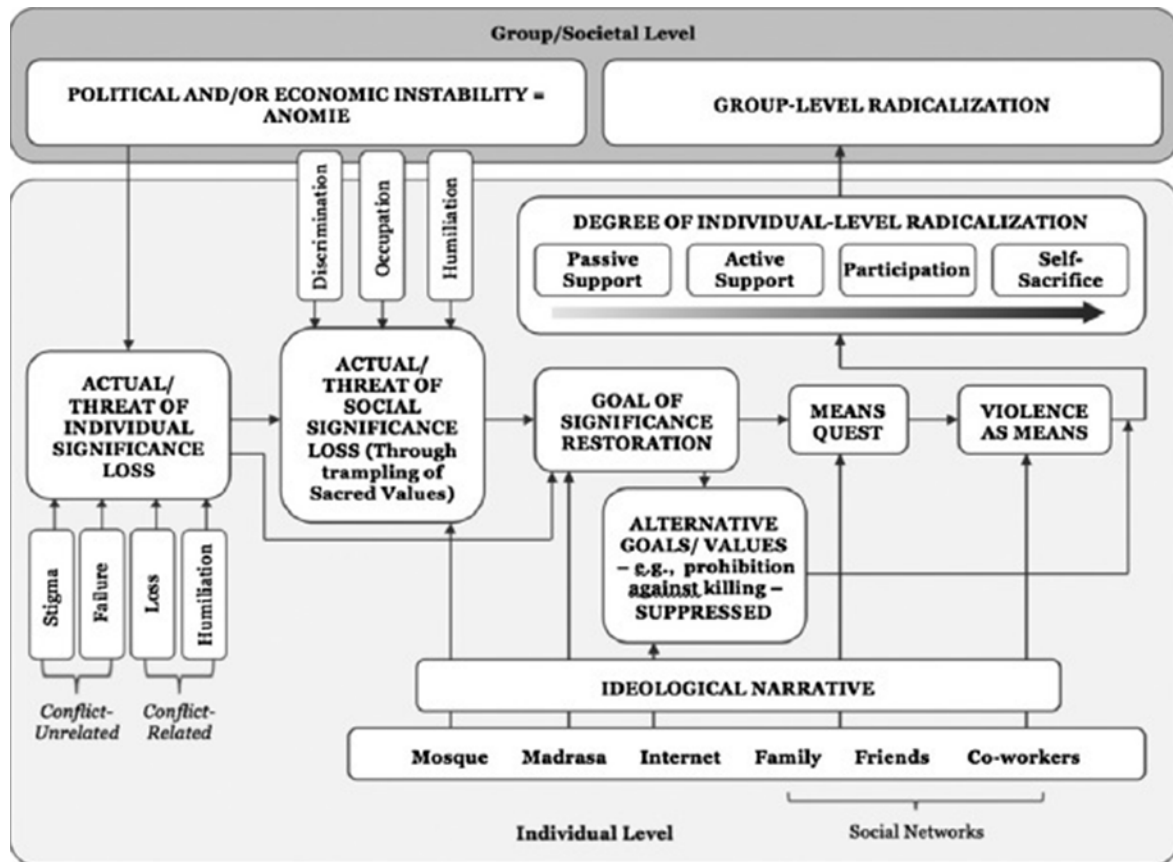
Radicalisation discourse, as expressed by scholars, policymakers, journalists and human rights activists, is replete with seemingly timeless, cross-cultural generalisations about radicalisation and the people who become, or might become, radicalised: that radicalisation is, variously, about finding meaning, identity, belonging, validation, excitement, love and so on – or some combination of all of these.¹⁴⁶ Yet these generalisations are more fictional platitudes than empirically robust knowledge-claims about radicalised individuals. This is because so few scholars have conducted empirical studies on the biographies and subjective experiences of those who have gone through the radicalisation process.¹⁴⁷

Even where scholars have sought to conduct such studies, by conducting interviews with current¹⁴⁸ or more typically former violent extremists¹⁴⁹ or with the friends and relatives of those who knew them,¹⁵⁰ it is hard to know how far the insights gleaned from this work can be extended beyond the particular individuals and groups that form the focal point of analysis.

This is in no way to diminish the value of this work, but it is to suggest that it would be unwise to try to draw from it anything resembling law-like generalisations about processes of radicalisation and deradicalisation. Schmid, for example, writes that given the overwhelming focus on jihadi radicalisation and the deradicalisation over the past decade “at least some of the findings from religious radicals might not be applicable to ethno-nationalist or left and right-wing militant radicals and extremists”.¹⁵¹ Robin Simcox calls this the “Awlakification” of terrorism, referring to the jihadi cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, whereby the conceptual categories for understanding jihadi radicalisation are unthinkingly applied to far-right and other non-jihadi forms of radicalisation.¹⁵²

Instead of focusing on the radicalised individual and their experiences of the radicalisation process in the different and specific contexts in which it occurs, much of the scholarship on radicalisation is taken up with modelling the radicalisation process in ever more elaborate and abstract ways. This has the effect of transforming what is a dynamic and dramatic human process into a desiccated checklist of generic “risk” factors. Far from being an active

agent with a complex life-story, the radicalised individual thereby vanishes into a plethora of intersecting vectors and arrows, much like in this depiction here:



Source: Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi and Rohan Gunaratna, “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism”, *Advances in Political Psychology*, 35 (1) (2014), 79.

A related problem with radicalisation research is that so much of it lacks specificity and precision and hence utility. For example, McCauley and Moskalenko identify no less than 12 mechanisms of radicalisation. “In every individual trajectory to terrorism of which we are aware”, they write, “multiple mechanisms can be identified”.¹⁵³ However, they do not specify whether some are more causally significant than others or how the various mechanisms intersect. Instead, they simply dodge the issue, concluding “that there are multiple, diverse pathways leading individuals and groups to radicalisation and terrorism.”¹⁵⁴

Michael Jensen *et al* similarly conclude, after mapping 8 “sufficient pathways to violence” and testing these on the basis of a sample of over 50 individuals who radicalised in the US between 1960 and 2013, that “radicalisation processes are inherently complex, commonly combining individual-level psychology, community grievances, group biases and material rewards to produce violent outcomes”.¹⁵⁵ When findings are *this* general they are apt to be almost useless.

Research on deradicalisation is even less conclusive and directive, especially from the perspective of policymakers. Not only do we lack thick descriptions of what the deradicalisation process is like from the inside; we also lack a sound knowledge-base for

determining whether deradicalisation programmes (broadly conceived¹⁵⁶) work or not.¹⁵⁷ This is not just because few, if any, deradicalisation programmes have gone through systematic, fully independent evaluation,¹⁵⁸ but also because the kind of experiment needed to measure the effects of any given programme on an offender population would require a control group that has not undergone a deradicalisation programme. As Marc Sageman puts it, with his trademark asperity, “simply put, in the absence of comparison with any control group, we have no idea whether the counter or de-radicalisation programmes work or not”.¹⁵⁹ In the absence of any firm and reliable data on deradicalisation programmes,¹⁶⁰ the consensus among academics is that they *can* or *might* work for *some* individuals, but this is scarcely very illuminating as a form of counsel for policymakers.

On the question of *how* deradicalisation programmes should be organised there doesn't seem to be much consensus at all. John Horgan and Mary Beth Altier suggest, rather vaguely, that “different approaches could be tailored to different types of individuals”, given that while for some ideology might have played a significant role, for others it might have not.¹⁶¹

And yet despite the cautious tone with which scholars discuss deradicalisation, many are broadly optimistic about the *potential* of deradicalisation programmes. Horgan and Altier, for example, conclude that many such programmes “hold great promise”.¹⁶² Horgan, more recently, has written that deradicalisation programmes, “if subjected to greater evaluation efforts, may prove far more beneficial than is currently believed”.¹⁶³ Douglas Weeks is even more forthright, arguing that “although there are many barriers to ‘deradicalisation’, it can and does happen when the right people and approach are in place”.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, many academics and experts assert that ex-extremists – so-called “formers” – can be useful as “credible” partners in broader counter-extremism efforts. According to Horgan, “credible former members of extremist groups can act as powerful voices to encourage disengagement in others in their networks and dissuade potential future generations of militants by deglamourising and delegitimising involvement”.¹⁶⁵ Peter Neumann has also expressed support for this view, concluding that the testimony of ISIS defectors “can be important in helping to prevent young people from being radicalised and recruited.”¹⁶⁶ However, it is important to note that there is little solid evidence to substantiate this confidence in formers,¹⁶⁷ and what evidence there is for it tends to be anecdotal and furnished by formers themselves.¹⁶⁸

4. Conclusion and recommendations

This report has sought to provide a snapshot of radicalisation discourse by analysing the 50 most cited academic articles in radicalisation research. It is by no means a comprehensive survey, but instead focuses on the main pillars of scholarly consensus that provide the interpretive frames for enlightened public discourse on radicalisation/deradicalisation.

The core finding of the report is that much of this wider discourse, driven by scholars who command or profess a specialist scientific understanding of terrorism, radicalisation, extremism and political violence more broadly, lacks a proper empirical foundation. Of the top-cited academic articles in radicalisation research, approximately a quarter (26%) are

based on new empirical data. The vast majority – nearly three quarters (74%) – are almost totally reliant on secondary sources.

This is not to suggest that all the 5 key pillars of scholarly consensus described in this report should be dismissed as unsound. Instead, what the report shows and what I should like to now spell out in more explicit terms is that many of them are simply platitudes that are not particularly illuminating or directive from the perspective of policy-making, while one in particular – the notion that the radicalised individual is “vulnerable” in some way – is not only lacking in empirical substance but serves to redirect attention away from murderous ideologies to the supposed deficits, whether social or psychological, of those who embrace them and which are invoked to explain how they came to do so.

To be more precise, it is platitudinous to say that radicalisation is a complex process, that anyone, potentially, can become radicalised and engage in political violence, and that some people, with the right treatment, can be persuaded to walk away from violent extremism. And while it has certainly become a cliché in so much academic and policy discourse to portray radicalisation as a process that disproportionately affects “the vulnerable”, this very conceptualisation not only lacks firm empirical support but also risks manufacturing ever greater numbers of violent extremists, a point I shall briefly elaborate on below.

Terrorism studies, of which radicalisation research is a part, provides important data on terrorist incidents and plots, the demographic profiles of various categories of terrorist offenders and much else of crucial importance.¹⁶⁹ However, it is seriously lacking in what anthropologists would call “thick descriptions”¹⁷⁰ of the process by which individuals become radicalised and involved in terrorist violence and the wider milieus in which all this happens. Indeed, radicalisation research, by focusing so much attention on the distant pushes and pulls of radicalisation tends to short-circuit the agent altogether, submerging him or her into ever more labyrinthine models of abstract social scientific explanation.

John Horgan has persuasively argued that “if one is to effectively study terrorism and terrorists from criminological and psychological perspectives, one *must* meet with and speak to individuals who are or who have been directly involved with a terrorist organisation”.¹⁷¹ The vast majority of radicalisation/extremism scholars, however, have had little sustained contact with the sorts of people they proclaim to have expert knowledge of, much less conducted research interviews with them.¹⁷² Yet this distance between researcher and researched has not prevented the former from constructing elaborate and elegantly nuanced models of the factors that supposedly drive the latter. It is of course difficult and labour-intensive to meet with and interview violent extremists,¹⁷³ but, as Horgan points out and as other researchers have demonstrated, it is certainly not impossible.¹⁷⁴

In the light of the above and the broader analysis that informs it, this report suggests and concludes with the following 4 recommendations:

1. UK policymakers and the wider public should be more cognisant of how little is reliably known about processes of radicalisation and deradicalisation. This doesn't mean that radicalisation research should be disregarded, but rather that the knowledge-claims and expert advice of scholars working in this specialist area should

be subjected to close critical scrutiny, especially by policymakers. Correspondingly, public officials should temper the confidence with which they discuss the problem of radicalisation, how individuals radicalise and what can be done about this.

2. The UK government and public-funding bodies should encourage and prioritise research on radicalisation/deradicalisation that is empirically driven and focused on *specific* individuals, ideologies, networks, milieus and deradicalisation initiatives in *specific* places and time-periods. Projects that seek to understand, say, current far-right activism in Norwich or Islamic State networks in London between 2013–2015 should be prioritised over studies that seek to synthesise previous studies or develop abstract models for explaining the pushes and pulls of radicalisation. Research that seeks to interview violent extremists and their supporters should especially be encouraged.
3. The UK government currently prohibits academic researchers from interviewing incarcerated prisoners convicted of terrorism offences. It should rethink this policy. Granting research access to this group of prisoners would likely greatly advance our knowledge-base of these individuals. Interviews conducted by academics with incarcerated terrorist offenders can be potentially very illuminating, as the work of Hugo Micheron¹⁷⁵ and several others¹⁷⁶ amply demonstrates.
4. The UK government should abandon “vulnerability” discourse in its counter-radicalisation policymaking and rhetoric. This is chiefly because there is no clear evidence to support the view that those who become violent extremists are any more vulnerable or in need of belonging, identity and meaning than those who do not become violent extremists.

At least three deleterious consequences follow from any continued adherence to vulnerability discourse: 1) it infantilises political opposition to the status quo and thereby serves to direct attention away from the *intrinsic appeal* of extremist ideologies, rooted in political grievance, sacred drama, transgression, violent contention and ideological purity; 2) it can be readily and cynically weaponised by violent extremists themselves to excuse and deny responsibility for their actions, if caught; and 3) it directs unnecessary attention towards young people in particular, given their inherent vulnerability, and inadvertency encourages and incentivises authorities to ever more closely monitor them for signs of “vulnerability to radicalisation”, thus producing more and more of them in what the philosopher Ian Hacking would describe as a “looping effect”.¹⁷⁷

Appendix

Top 50 cited articles ranked in order of citations received

Rank	Article	No. of times cited
1	Clarke McCauley and Sofia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalization: Pathways toward terrorism", <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> , 20 (3) (2008), 415–433 (https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550802073367).	1676
2	Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories", <i>Journal of Strategic Security</i> , 4 (4) (2011), 7–36 (http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1).	1311
3	Alex P. Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review", ICCT Research Paper (March 2013), 1–91 (http://www.icct.nl/app/uploads/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf).	1152
4	Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The homegrown threat", The New York City Police Department (2007), 1–90 (https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/radicalization-west-homegrown-threat).	1061
5	Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi and Rohan Gunaratna, "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism", <i>Advances in Political Psychology</i> , 35 (1) (2014), 69–93 (https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163).	943
6	John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism", <i>The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</i> , 618 (1) (2008), 80–94 (https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162083175).	848
7	Mark Sedgwick, "The concept of radicalization as a source of confusion", <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> , 22 (4) (2010), 479–494 (https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2010.491009).	804
8	Peter R. Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalisation", <i>International Affairs</i> 89 (4) (2013), 873–893 (https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12049).	702
9	Arun Kundnani, "Radicalisation: the journey of a concept", <i>Race & Class</i> , 54 (2) (2012), 3–25 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396812454984).	654
10	Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent radicalization in Europe: What we	649

	know and what we do not know”, <i>Studies in Conflict & Terrorism</i> , 33 (9) (2010), 797–814 (https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2010.501423).	
11	Randy Borum, “Radicalization into violent extremism II: A review of conceptual models and empirical research”, <i>Journal of Strategic Security</i> , 4 (4) (2011), 37–62 (http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.2).	607
12	John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, “Rehabilitating the Terrorists?: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalization Programs”, <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> , 22 (2) (2010), 267–291 (https://doi.org/10.1080/09546551003594748).	580
13	Andrew Silke, “Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization”, <i>European Journal of Criminology</i> , 5(1) (2008), 99–123 (https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370807084226).	561
14	Michael King and Donald M. Taylor, “The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence”, <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> , 23 (4) (2011), 602–622 (https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.587064).	533
15	Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, “Measuring Political Mobilization: The Distinction Between Activism and Radicalism”, <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> , 21 (2) (2009), 239–260 (https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550902765508).	509
16	Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, “The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism”, <i>Studies in Conflict & Terrorism</i> , 38 (11) (2015), 958–975 (https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1051375).	514
17	Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, “The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization”, <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> , 24 (1) (2012), 1–21 (https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.594923).	485
18	Clarke McCauley and Sofia Moskalenko, “Understanding political radicalization: The two-pyramids model”, <i>American Psychologist</i> , 72 (3) (2017), 205–216 (https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000062).	483
19	Marc Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research”, <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> , 26 (4), (2014), 565–580 (https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.895649).	476
20	Bertjan Doosje, Fathali M. Moghaddam, Arie W Kruglanski, Arjan de Wolf, Liesbeth Mann and Allard R Feddes, “Terrorism, radicalization and de-radicalization”, <i>Current Opinion in Psychology</i> , 11 (2016), 79–84 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.06.008).	461
21	Ines von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards and Luke Gribbon “Radicalisation in the digital era: The use of the Internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism”, Rand Europe (2013), 1–59 (https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf).	346
22	Manoel Horta Ribeiro, Raphael Ottoni, Robert West, Virgílio A. F. Almeida and Wagner Meira, “Auditing radicalization pathways on	318

	YouTube”, <i>Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency</i> (January 2020), 131–141, (https://doi.org/10.1145/3351095.3372879).	
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- 43 Jonathan Githens-Mazer, “The rhetoric and reality: radicalization and political discourse”, *International Political Science Review*, 33(5), (2012), 556–567 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512112454416>). 145
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- 45 Donatella della Porta, “Radicalization: A Relational Perspective”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 21 (May 2018), 461–474, (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042716-102314>). 126
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47	Amy-Jane Gielen, "Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances, and How?", <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> , 31 (6) (2019), 1149–1167, (https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1313736)	123
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49	John Horgan and Mary Beth Altier, "The future of de-radicalization programs", <i>Georgetown Journal of International Affairs</i> , 13 (2) (Summer/Fall 2012), 83–90 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/43134238).	117
50	Lorne L. Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-Grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue", <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> , 22 (1) (2009), 1–21 (https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550903409163).	110

Notes

¹ The term “elite” has lately acquired a political valence, but here I use it merely to refer to a specific group of credentialed professionals who, to quote Christopher Lasch, “control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, manage the instruments of cultural production and thus set the terms of public debate” (Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 26).

² When I use “radicalisation discourse”, I also mean to refer to ways of talking about *deradicalisation*, but it would be clumsy and tiresome to keep referring to “radicalisation and deradicalisation discourse”.

³ Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories and Literature* (Oxford: North Holland, 1988), 179.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Andrew Silke, “An Introduction to Terrorism Research”, in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 10.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Marc Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26 (4), (2014), 566.

⁸ Ibid., 567.

⁹ Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, “Radicalization in the West: The homegrown threat”, The New York City Police Department (2007), 1–92 (<https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/radicalization-west-homegrown-threat>).

¹⁰ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

¹¹ Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research”, 568.

¹² Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹³ Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research”, 568.

¹⁴ Ibid., 569.

¹⁵ Jessica Stern, “Response to Marc Sageman’s ‘The Stagnation in Terrorism Research’”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26 (4) (2014), 608.

¹⁶ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Some Things We Think We’ve Learned Since 9/11: A Commentary on Marc Sageman’s ‘The Stagnation in Terrorism Research’”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26 (4) (2014), 601–606.

¹⁷ Alex P. Schmid, “Comments on Marc Sageman’s Polemic ‘The Stagnation in Terrorism Research’”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26 (4) (2014), 593.

¹⁸ Andrew Silke and Jennifer Schmidt-Petersen, “The Golden Age? What the 100 Most Cited Articles in Terrorism Studies Tell Us,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29 (4) (2017), 692.

¹⁹ Ibid., 700.

²⁰ Bart Schuurman, “Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32 (5) (2020), 1022.

²¹ Ibid., 1013.

²² Peter R. Neumann and Scott Kleinmann, “How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?”, *Democracy and Security*, 9 (4) (2013), 361.

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- ²³ Neumann and Kleinmann, “How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?”, 360.
- ²⁴ Zack Stanton, “The Problem Isn’t Just One Insurrection. It’s Mass Radicalization”, *Politico*, 11 February 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/11/mass-radicalization-trump-insurrection-468746>.
- ²⁵ Chris Riotta, “Trump ‘radicalised terrorists’, House representative says as she speaks of terrifying Capitol riots experience”, *The Independent*, 13 January 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/judy-chu-trump-impeachment-house-of-representatives-b1786706.html>.
- ²⁶ Tim Marcin, “Fox News ‘Radicalized’ Donald Trump, Network Host Says”, *Newsweek*, 31 August 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/fox-news-radicalized-donald-trump-host-network-greg-gutfeld-1099096>.
- ²⁷ Cathy Young, “How Trump is radicalizing the left”, *The Week*, 2 October 2020, <https://theweek.com/articles/939651/how-trump-radicalizing-left>.
- ²⁸ Martin Bentham, “Covid pandemic is helping extremists ‘to radicalise young people’, terror boss warns”, *Evening Standard*, 10 May 2021, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/covid-pandemic-helped-extremists-radicalise-young-people-b934188.html>.
- ²⁹ Caleb Spencer, “Coronavirus: ‘Children may have been radicalised in lockdown’”, BBC, 30 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-53082476>.
- ³⁰ Paul Mason, “The Covid deniers have been humiliated but they are still dangerous”, *The New Statesman*, 6 January 2021, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2021/01/covid-deniers-have-been-humiliated-they-are-still-dangerous>.
- ³¹ Ben Glaze, “Rising threat from young right-wing terrorists radicalised in their bedrooms, MP warns”, *Mirror*, 22 February 2023, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/rising-threat-young-right-wing-29287288>.
- ³² Michael Holden, “Cameron – Internet firms must do more after UK girls head to Syria”, Reuters, 23 February 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-crisis-britain-schoolgirls/cameron-internet-firms-must-do-more-after-uk-girls-head-to-syria-idUKKBNOLR1UL20150223>.
- ³³ In the foreword to the *Prevent Strategy* (2011), the former Prime Minister Teresa May insisted that it is “vital that our counter-terrorism strategy contains a plan to prevent radicalisation and stop would-be terrorists from committing mass murder”. May furthermore insisted that this crucially involves confronting “the extremist ideology at the heart of the threat we face” (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf, 2).
- ³⁴ “Countering Violent Extremism”.
- ³⁵ Peter R. Neumann, Introduction to “Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence”, Papers from the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence London, January 17–18, 2008, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Perspectives-on-Radicalisation-Political-Violence.pdf>. Ibid., 3. See also Mark Sedgwick, “The concept of radicalization as a source of confusion,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22 (4) (2010), 480-81.

³⁶ It is instructive that Fathali Moghaddam's widely cited paper, "The Staircase to Terrorism," which was published in 2005, makes no mention of the term at all (Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism: a psychological exploration," *American Psychologist*, 60(2) (2005), 161-169).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁸ See Neumann and Kleinmann, "How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?", 363–64.

³⁹ Silke and Schmidt-Petersen, "The Golden Age?", 696.

⁴⁰ DOI refers to a "Digital Object Identifier", a string of numbers, letters and symbols used to identify an article or document.

⁴¹ For further clarification on the distinction between primary and secondary sources, see Schuurman, "Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016", 1015.

⁴² This approach differs from that taken by Schuurman, whose criterion for classifying an article as using primary data is whether it uses "any first-hand sources or statistical analyses based on information collected and/or analyzed by the author" (Schuurman, "Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016", 1015–16, emphasis in original). Accordingly, Schuurman writes, "authors who conducted years of field work in remote locations and authors who held a 10-minute telephone interview are both seen as using primary data". (*Ibid.*, 1016). Schuurman explains that using such a low inclusion threshold "avoids making subjective judgements on what primary data or which types of statistical analyses were 'good' or 'extensive' enough; a process bound to introduce considerable bias into the results". (*Ibid.*) Schuurman, I think, is mistaken here, in that such judgments are in fact wholly necessary and unavoidable if one wants to take the measure of the performance and promise of any given research field, where it is essential to distinguish between research that is grounded on thin evidence and that which is grounded on extensive evidence. To use Schuurman's own example, there is clearly a vast difference between an article based on a single ten-minute interview and one based on a decade of fieldwork, such that any approach that fails to distinguish between the two is unlikely to be very helpful.

⁴³ Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree, "Guest Editorial: Processes of Radicalization and De-Radicalization", *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 6 (1) (2012), 4–10; Randy Borum, "Rethinking Radicalization", *Journal of Strategic Security* 4 (4) (2011), 1–6.

⁴⁴ Schuurman, "Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016"; Neumann and Kleinmann, "How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?"; Sageman, "The Stagnation in Terrorism Research". I should like to note that while the first two articles here can accurately be described as "original research" I did not include them in the sample of OR articles, since their explanatory focus was on terrorism/radicalisation research rather than on actual terrorism/radicalisation.

⁴⁵ Sedgwick, "The concept of radicalization as a source of confusion"; Arun Kundnani, "Radicalisation: the journey of a concept", *Race & Class*, 54 (2) (2012), 3–25; Jonathan Githens-Mazer, "The rhetoric and reality: radicalization and political discourse", *International Political Science Review*, 33(5), (2012), 556–567.

⁴⁶ Silke and Schmidt-Petersen, "The Golden Age?", 699.

⁴⁷ Schuurman, "Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016", 1016.

⁴⁸ Neumann and Kleinmann, "How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?", 372. The remaining 1 percent is unaccounted for in this article.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁵⁰ Alex P. Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review”, ICCT Research Paper (March 2013), 1–91.

⁵¹ The single exception is Lorenzo Vidino and James Brandon, “Countering Radicalization in Europe”, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King’s College London (2012), 1–78.

⁵² John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, “Rehabilitating the Terrorists?: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalization Programs”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22 (2) (2010), 267–291; John Horgan, “Deradicalization or Disengagement?: A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2 (4) (2008), 3–8; Amy-Jane Gielen, “Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances, and How?”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 31 (6) (2019), 1149–1167; John Horgan and Mary Beth Altier, “The future of de-radicalization programs”, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 13 (2) (Summer/Fall 2012), 83–90.

⁵³ Silke and Schmidt-Petersen, “The Golden Age?”, 698–99.

⁵⁴ Neumann and Kleinmann, “How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?”, 369.

⁵⁵ See Silke and Schmidt-Petersen, “The Golden Age?”, 698.

⁵⁶ See Andrew Silke, “The Impact of 9/11 on Research on Terrorism”, in *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 83–5. “Since 9/11”, Silke wrote, “Islamist groups now utterly dominate research attention, with nearly 60% of articles with such foci being directed on Islamist groups.” See, also, Bart Schuurman, “Topics in terrorism research: reviewing trends and gaps, 2007–2016”, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12 (3) (2019), 472: “Research on terrorism continues to be overwhelmingly focused on matters related to jihadism.”

⁵⁷ Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, “The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24 (1) (2012), 1–21; Ines von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards and Luke Gribbon “Radicalisation in the digital era: The use of the Internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism”, Rand Europe (2013), 1–59; Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert, “Why conventional wisdom on radicalization fails: the persistence of a failed discourse”, *International Affairs*, 86 (4) (2010), 889–901; Daniel Koehler, “The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet”, *The Journal for Deradicalization*, 1 (2014), 116–134; Lorenzo Vidino and James Brandon, “Countering Radicalization in Europe”, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King’s College London (2012), 1–78.

⁵⁸ Von Behr, Reding, Edwards and Gribbon “Radicalisation in the digital era.”

⁵⁹ Neumann and Kleinmann, “How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research”, 372; Schuurman, “Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016”, 1020.

⁶⁰ Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalisation”, 874.

⁶¹ This article is among the 50 most cited articles listed in this report.

⁶² Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation”, 17–18.

⁶³ On the “fault-line” between definitions “that emphasize extremist beliefs (‘cognitive radicalization’) and those that focus on extremist behaviour (‘behavioural radicalization’)”, see Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalisation”, 873.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁵ Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalisation”, 874.

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- ⁶⁶ Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation”, 23.
- ⁶⁷ Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalisation”, 874.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ⁷⁰ McCauley and Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of political radicalization”, 419.
- ⁷¹ See Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 128.
- ⁷² John Horgan, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism”, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 618 (1) (2008), 80.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 81.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ Bertjan Doosje, Fathali M. Moghaddam, Arie W Kruglanski, Arjan de Wolf, Liesbeth Mann and Allard R Feddes, “Terrorism, radicalization and de-radicalization”, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 11 (2016), 79.
- ⁷⁶ Jerrold M. Post, “Psychology”, in Club de Madrid, ed., *Addressing the Causes of Terrorism* (Madrid: Club de Madrid, 2005), 7–8.
- ⁷⁷ Neumann and Kleinmann, “How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research”, 363.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., 362.
- ⁷⁹ Horgan, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes”, 84–85.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 84.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., 84–85.
- ⁸² See Alex P. Schmid, “Research on Radicalisation: Topics and Themes”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10 (3) (2016), 26, <https://www.ijstor.org/stable/26297594>.
- ⁸³ Silber and Bhatt, “Radicalization in the West”, 8.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., 36.
- ⁸⁵ Randy Borum, “Radicalization into violent extremism II: A review of conceptual models and empirical research”, *Journal of Strategic Security*, 4 (4) (2011), 43.
- ⁸⁶ In this respect, radicalisation research has much in common with earlier thinking about religious/cult conversion, where a passive subject is brainwashed by external powers (James T. Richardson, “The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24 (2) (1985), 163. See, relatedly, Manni Crone, “Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body”, *International Affairs*, 92 (3) (2016), 599.
- ⁸⁷ Doosj *et al*, “Terrorism, radicalization and de-radicalization”, 82.
- ⁸⁸ Horgan, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes”, 90; Randy Borum, “Radicalization into violent extremism II: A review of conceptual models and empirical research”, *Journal of Strategic Security*, 4 (4) (2011), 44, 56; Matteo Vergani, Muhammad Iqbal, Ekin Ilbahar and Greg Barton, “The Three Ps of Radicalization: Push, Pull and Personal. A Systematic Scoping Review of the Scientific Evidence about Radicalization Into Violent Extremism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43 (10) (2020), 854–885.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., 856.
- ⁹⁰ Randy Borum, “Psychological Vulnerabilities and Propensities for Involvement in Violent Extremism”, *Behav. Sci. Law*, 32 (3) (2014), 294.

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- ⁹¹ Kevin McDonald, *Radicalization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 10, emphases in original.
- ⁹² Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes", 92.
- ⁹³ McCauley and Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalization", 429.
- ⁹⁴ Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation", 5.
- ⁹⁵ John Horgan, "Discussion Point: The End of Radicalization?", START, 28 September 2012, 2, <https://www.start.umd.edu/news/discussion-point-end-radicalization>.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid.
- ⁹⁷ Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories", *Journal of Strategic Security*, 4 (4) (2011), 8.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹⁹ Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalisation", 879.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 880.
- ¹⁰¹ John Horgan, "Deradicalization Programs: Recommendations for Policy and Practice", Resolve Network Policy Note, 21 August, 1, <https://www.resolvenet.org/system/files/2021-09/RSVE%20Policy%20Note%20Scrivens%20et%20al%20September%202021.pdf>.
- ¹⁰² For a succinct summary and expression of this viewpoint, see Liam Duffy Liam Duffy, "You can't deradicalise every terrorist", *UnHerd*, 31 March 2021, <https://unherd.com/2021/03/you-cant-deradicalise-every-terrorist/>. Duffy writes that "we must try to deradicalise", while acknowledging just how difficult and perilous such an endeavour can be.
- ¹⁰³ Notable contributions include: John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (London: Routledge, 2009); and Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (eds.), *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (London: Routledge, 2008).
- ¹⁰⁴ Horgan and Altier, "The future of de-radicalization programs", 88.
- ¹⁰⁵ Della Porta and LaFree, "Guest Editorial: Processes of Radicalization and De-Radicalization", 7; see also Horgan, "Deradicalization or Disengagement?", 3; Horgan, "Deradicalization Programs", 2.
- ¹⁰⁶ Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes", 91.
- ¹⁰⁷ Horgan and Altier "The future of de-radicalization programs", 84.
- ¹⁰⁸ Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes", 92.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁰ William Shawcross, "Independent Review of Prevent", 8 February 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1134986/Independent_Review_of_Prevent.pdf, 6.
- ¹¹¹ "Revised Prevent Duty Guidance: for England and Wales", 16 July, 2015 (updated 1 April 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance/revised-prevent-duty-guidance-for-england-and-wales>.
- ¹¹² Ibid.
- ¹¹³ Ibid., my italics.
- ¹¹⁴ See Simon Cottee, *ISIS and the Pornography of Violence* (New York: Anthem, 2019); and Cottee, *Watching Murder: ISIS, Death Videos and Radicalization* (London: Routledge, 2022).
- ¹¹⁵ David Jones, "Brainwashing of 'Jihadi Jack': His parents are so respectable. But here we reveal how a very middle-class boy from Oxford was recruited by Islamic fanatics", *The Daily Mail*, 30 January 2016, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3423758/Brainwashing->

Jihadi-Jack-parents-respectable-reveal-middle-class-boy-Oxford-recruited-Islamic-fanatics.html.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith, “Aqsa Mahmood: Parents of ‘Bedroom Radical’ Fighting in Syria Plead for Return of Daughter”, *The Independent*, 4 September 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/iraqsyria-crisis-parents-of-isis-bedroom-radical-plead-for-daughter-to-come-home-9711447.html>.

¹¹⁸ See “Dewsbury teenager is ‘UK’s youngest ever suicide bomber’”, BBC News, 14 June 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-33126132>.

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¹²³ See esp. Graeme Wood, “What We Still Don’t Know About the Islamic State’s Foreign Fighters”, *The Atlantic*, 19 August 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/isis-foreign-fighters/537279/>.

¹²⁴ Anthony Loyd, “Shamima Begum: I Was Brainwashed. I Knew Nothing”, *The Times*, 1 April 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isis-bride-shamima-begum-i-regret-everything-please-let-me-start-my-life-again-in-britain-9g0tn08vn>.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Hanna Yusuf and Steve Swann, “Shamima Begum: Lawyer Says Teen Was ‘Groomed’”, BBC News, 31 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48444604>.

¹²⁷ Martin Chulov and Bethan McKernan, “Hoda Muthana ‘Deeply Regrets’ Joining ISIS and Wants to Return Home”, *The Guardian*, 17 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/17/us-woman-hoda-muthana-deeply-regrets-joining-isis-and-wants-return-home>.

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¹²⁹ Dipesh Gadhur, “‘I Want to Redeem Myself’, Says Jihadi Bride. ‘Take Me Home’”, *The Sunday Times*, 28 September 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-want-to-redeem-myself-says-jihadi-bride-take-me-home-h0bzxkg9d>.

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¹³¹ See Bill McLoughlin, “Shamima Begum begs for UK return in order to help fight terrorism”, *Evening Standard*, 26 January 2022,

<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/shamima-begum-uk-return-terrorism-syria-b978827.html>.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ William Shawcross, “Independent Review of Prevent”, 8 February 2023, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1134986/Independent Review of Prevent.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1134986/Independent_Review_of_Prevent.pdf), 42.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 158. Whether “susceptibility” resolves the issue of agency remains to be seen, since it necessarily carries the implication that violent extremism is like disease that the immunocompromised are vulnerable to catching.

¹³⁵ Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, “Measuring Political Mobilization: The Distinction Between Activism and Radicalism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21 (2) (2009), 239–260.

¹³⁶ Thomas Hegghammer, “Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia”, *Middle East Policy*, 13 (4) (2006), 40.

¹³⁷ Bartlett and Miller, “The Edge of Violence”, 3.

¹³⁸ Ibid., see footnotes 26, 92, 121, 133 and 135.

¹³⁹ Ibid., footnote 36.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., footnote 70.

¹⁴¹ Silber and Bhatt, “Radicalization in the West”, 15.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Von Behr, Reding, Edwards and Gribbon “Radicalisation in the digital era”, 22.

¹⁴⁴ Koehler, “The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet”. Koehler says little about the lives and background of his interviewees, including whether any had committed acts of violence when they were part of the extremist fold.

¹⁴⁵ To cite just two prominent examples: Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Edwin Bakker, “Jihadi Terrorists in Europe and Global Salafi Jihadis”, in Rik Coolsaet, ed., *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge in Europe* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2008), 69–84.

¹⁴⁶ As the filmmaker Deeyah Khan rather archly puts it, “Each journey has its own beginning, but each is a quest – for meaning, identity, community; for answers.”

Deeyah Khan, “For Isis women, it’s not about ‘jihadi brides’: it’s about escape”, *The Observer*, 21 June 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/21/isis-women-its-not-about-jihadi-brides-its-about-escape>.

¹⁴⁷ See John Horgan, “The Case for Firsthand Research”, in Silke (ed.), *Research on Terrorism*, 30.

¹⁴⁸ See, for example, Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values and What it Means to Be Human* (London: Allen Lane, 2010); Alessandro Orsini, *Sacrifice: My Life in a Fascist Militia*, trans. Sarah Jane Nides (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Mark S. Hamm, *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalization and the Evolving Terrorist Threat* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*; John Horgan, Mary Beth Altier, Neil Shortland and Max Taylor, “Walking away: the disengagement and de-radicalization of a violent right-wing extremist”, *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 9 (2) (2017), 63–77.

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- ¹⁵⁰ See, for example, Simon Cottee, *Black Flags of the Caribbean: How Trinidad Became an ISIS Hotspot* (London: I. B. Tauris, Bloomsbury, 2021); Fabien Truong, *Radicalized Loyalties: Becoming Muslim in the West* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Kathrine Elmoose Jørgensen, “‘I Don’t Justify Anything Regarding My Son’: Danish Foreign Fighters’ Initial Attraction and Reaffirmed Commitment to Islamic State and Al Qaeda – Testimonies from Five Relatives”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 31 May (2022).
- ¹⁵¹ Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation”, 20.
- ¹⁵² Private communication.
- ¹⁵³ McCauley and Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of political radicalization”, 429.
- ¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵⁵ Michael A. Jensen, Anita Atwell Seate and Patrick A. James, “Radicalization to Violence: A Pathway Approach to Studying Extremism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32 (5) (2020), 1082.
- ¹⁵⁶ See Horgan, “Deradicalization Programs”, 2.
- ¹⁵⁷ Horgan and Altier, “The future of de-radicalization programs”, 87.
- ¹⁵⁸ Kruglanski, Gelfand, Bélanger, Sheveland, Hetiarachchi and Gunaratna, “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization”, 87.
- ¹⁵⁹ Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,” 569.
- ¹⁶⁰ Some programmes claim strikingly low rates of recidivism among their “beneficiaries”, to use the language of the Saudi programme, but given the professional incentives to amplify successes these claims cannot be regarded as reliable (see Horgan and Braddock, “Rehabilitating the Terrorists?”, 268).
- ¹⁶¹ Horgan and Altier, “The future of de-radicalization programs”, 88.
- ¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 89.
- ¹⁶³ Horgan, “Deradicalization Programs”, 2.
- ¹⁶⁴ Douglas Weeks, “Lessons Learned from U.K. Efforts to Deradicalize Terror Offenders”, *CTC Sentinel*, 14 (3) (2021), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/lessons-learned-from-u-k-efforts-to-deradicalize-terror-offenders/>.
- ¹⁶⁵ Horgan, “Deradicalization Programs”, 2.
- ¹⁶⁶ Peter R. Neumann, “Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors”, ICSR, 2015, 6.
- ¹⁶⁷ See esp. Daniel Koehler, Gordon Clubb, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Michael H. Becker & Michael J. Williams, “Don’t Kill the Messenger: Perceived Credibility of Far-Right Former Extremists and Police Officers in P/CVE Communication”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2023), 1–2.
- ¹⁶⁸ See, for example, Ryan Scrivens, Vivek Venkatesh, Maxime Bérubé and Tiana Gaudette, “Combating Violent Extremism: Voices of Former Right-Wing Extremists”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 45 (8) (2022), esp at 672.
- ¹⁶⁹ See Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research”, 571; Richard English, “The future study of terrorism”, *European Journal of International Security*, 1 (2) (2016), 138–40; Silke, “An Introduction to Terrorism Research”, 9.
- ¹⁷⁰ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretations of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6.
- ¹⁷¹ Horgan, “The Case for Firsthand Research,” 30–31, emphasis in original.
- ¹⁷² This is a long-standing problem in terrorism research. As Bruce Hoffman put it in 2004, referring to Africa’s Victorian-era cartographers: “Just as the cartographers a century ago mapped from a distance a vast and impenetrable continent few of them had ever seen,

most contemporary terrorism research is conducted far removed from, and therefore with little direct knowledge of, the actual terrorists themselves.” (Bruce Hoffman, Foreword to Silke (ed.), *Research on Terrorism*, xviii)

¹⁷³ Neumann and Kleinmann, “How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?”, 378.

¹⁷⁴ Horgan, “The Case for Firsthand Research”, 31.

¹⁷⁵ Hugo Micheron, *Le jihadisme français* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁷⁶ Hamm, *The Spectacular Few*; Ariel Merari, Ilan Diamant, Arie Bibi, Yoav Broshi, and Giora Zakin, “Personality Characteristics of ‘Self Martyrs’/‘Suicide Bombers’ and Organizers of Suicide Attacks”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22(1) (2010), 87–101.

¹⁷⁷ This is the process by which emotional distress or turmoil are shaped and directed by social reactions and diagnostic labelling, which, in turn, strongly affect the course and expression of the distress (see Ian Hacking, “Making Up People”, *London Review of Books*, 17 August 2006, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v28/n16/ian-hacking/making-up-people>).