

ROAD TO EXTREMISM:

IDENTITY CRISES & RADICALIZATION IN WESTERN SOCIETIES

 JUNE 24, 2024 | RESEARCH  35 MIN READING



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This paper investigates how identity crises can lead to radicalization in Western contexts (North America, Europe, Australia), drawing from disciplines like social psychology, criminology, and political science.
- Identity crisis can lead to radicalization when individuals who feel alienated and dissatisfied with their current beliefs drift towards extremist ideologies. These ideologies can provide a sense of belonging, identity, and purpose, fulfilling psychological needs and making individuals susceptible to the narratives and social networks of extremist groups.
- Islamist radicalism appeals as a defensive reaction to perceived threats to social identity, portraying a narrative of victimization by Western powers. While it offers solutions to various problems, very few Muslims in the West experiencing identity crises turn to terrorism.
- There are methodological challenges in directly studying the role of identity crises in the radicalization process. Researchers use proxy measures like alienation and anomia — the inability to name objects — to explore how personal identity issues can lead to terrorism, highlighting that such crises, while significant, are part of complex interactions that drive radicalization.
- Extremist groups like Daesh exploit identity crises by constructing a compelling narrative that offers a sense of belonging, purpose, and significance. They strategically manipulate social identities, using social media to resonate with those who feel alienated or disenfranchised. This approach effectively creates an 'us vs. them' narrative that attracts individuals to their cause, offering them a clear identity and community.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen community engagement:** Enhance community bonds by creating programs that promote social integration and provide support networks. These initiatives should reduce feelings of alienation and foster a sense of belonging, helping to mitigate identity crises.
- **Promote inclusive narratives and educational initiatives:** Develop and spread inclusive narratives through education, media, and public policies that acknowledge and celebrate diversity across cultural, religious, and ethnic groups. Implement educational programs focused on critical thinking and emotional intelligence to counteract extremist ideologies and support identity development.
- **Integrated research and policy development:** Support rigorous research to understand the psychological mechanisms of radicalization and inform targeted interventions. Develop policies that take into consideration the broad spectrum of extremism; integrate these efforts across various levels to ensure effective prevention strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary landscape is complex and includes multiple cohorts, dynamic and fluid identities and complicated pathways to terrorism. It includes the sons and grandsons of Muslim immigrants, who radicalize at an increasingly young age. Sometimes, these cohorts are described as superficially integrated into Western society. In reality, some of them might superficially tick all the boxes of integration — have a good education, friends, and the prospect of finding a good job — but still experience deep resentment against the West. It's important to remember that not all Muslims born in the West who turn to Islamism reject their host culture due to personal experiences and perceptions of discrimination, racism, and inequality. Some do, but others identify with Western culture.

However, they might react against changes in Western societies that they perceive to be threatening. They may also resent their parents and grandparents' apparent passivity in responding to problems that are perceived to victimize Muslims globally. Sometimes they do not identify with either the host or heritage cultures and find a sense of self-esteem and stability in unambiguous and powerful radical identities. There are cases of people who went through a phase of identifying with Western culture, but then appeared to go through a process of rediscovering their ethnic/religious identity. Such journeys of rediscovery may be sparked by a need for distinctiveness, or by perceived individual or collective grievances such as exclusion, discrimination, or bullying.

Furthermore, it is key to recognize another potential category of candidates for contemporary Islamist terrorism in the West — converts to Islam.

They tend to be alienated or marginalized in some way and often show excessive zeal as a way of demonstrating their commitment. Olivier Roy¹ subdivides converts into four types: Politicized rebels attracted by the anti-establishment aspects of Islamism; religious nomads who find Islamism through searching for the 'right' religion; former drug addicts and petty thieves who find a sense of belonging and an escape from a life of crime; and ethnic minorities who find rebuke against a racist society. In any of these cases, perceptions of incompatibility between the different identities prevail. In this context, radical Islamism offers them an artificial but strong and unambiguous sense of belonging and an identity that enables them to fight perceived personal and collective injustices.

NOT ALL MUSLIMS BORN IN THE WEST WHO TURN TO ISLAMISM REJECT THEIR HOST CULTURE DUE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

This paper aims to illuminate the complex relationships between identity crisis and radicalization in Western contexts, with a specific focus on radical Islamism and groups like Al Qaida and Daesh. In radicalization research, an identity crisis involves uncertainty about one's self and societal role, potentially leading to extremist ideologies. This crisis may stem from being a social misfit and lack of recognition, making individuals susceptible to extremist narratives that offer identity, community, and purpose.

¹ O. Roy, "Globalized Islam: the search for a new Ummah," *Islamology* 7, no. 1 (2017): 11-40.

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In the first section, this paper will define and introduce a broad range of psychological and criminological concepts that help to understand how identity crisis can lead to radicalization and terrorism, using key frameworks and theories that influence contemporary understanding of radicalization and terrorism in both academic and policy circles, such as the Risk Analysis Framework, Social Identity Theory and Significance Quest Theory.



North America, Europe, and Australia are experiencing new waves of extremism that blend a variety of beliefs, interests, and grievances.

In the second section, we propose case studies and examine selected empirical studies that illuminate the relationship between the theories analyzed in the previous section and other relevant concepts associated with identity crisis (like alienation and anomia) and the progression towards extremist violence within Western countries, specifically North America, Europe, and Australia. While acknowledging the lack of systematic comparative research on the topic, this section summarizes findings from selected small-range comparative studies and tries to discuss factors influencing radicalization across different geographical areas, highlighting potential spatial variations in the radicalisation process.

The third section of this report discusses how terrorist groups cynically construct and exploit identity crises, such as people's vulnerabilities, needs, search for meaning, and belonging, for recruitment purposes. It examines the emotional and social pathways that lead individuals to seek out violent and extremist ideologies and groups. This analysis delves into the methods employed by these groups to manipulate the innate human quest for identity and community, turning personal crises into gateways for radicalization. By understanding these tactics, the section aims to shed light on the complex interplay between individual psychological needs and the broader social mechanisms at play, offering insights into how individuals are drawn into the orbit of violent extremism.

Finally, the report presents policy recommendations that encompass suggestions for community engagement, education, and social support to prevent radicalization, with an emphasis on addressing the underlying identity crises that often precede radicalization. These recommendations highlight the importance of tackling identity-related issues as a fundamental strategy to curb radicalization.

While the focus of this study is on radical Islamism within Western contexts – with an emphasis on groups like Al Qaida and Daesh, the processes and pathways detailed in the following sections apply more broadly and are not unique to this ideology. North America, Europe, and Australia are experiencing new waves of extremism that blend a variety of beliefs, interests, and grievances.

These include elements of the far-right, anti-government sentiment, environmentalism, misogyny, and millennialism, among others.

Various terms have been coined to describe this phenomenon, such as “salad bar extremism”, “grievance-fuelled extremism”, and “composite violent extremism (CoV-E)”², all highlighting the mix of ambiguous and often interwoven motives, generally propelled by conspiracy theories circulating online.

While the majority of people involved in social movements championing these ideas are not violent and pose no direct threat to democracy, there have been isolated incidents of violence and terrorism carried out by individuals subscribing to this multifaceted ideology.

ANTI-GOVERNMENT AND LIBERTARIAN VIEWS EXPLOIT FRUSTRATIONS WITH GOVERNMENTAL ACTIONS AND PERCEIVED THREATS TO INDIVIDUAL FREEDOMS.

These emerging forms of extremism are also partly driven by crises of identity among followers. Right-wing ideologies capitalize on feelings of disenfranchisement and apprehension regarding cultural or demographic changes, promoting a narrative of heritage and nationalism.

Anti-government and libertarian views exploit frustrations with governmental actions and perceived threats to individual freedoms, exacerbated by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as lockdowns, vaccine mandates, and mask requirements. The environmental narrative resonates with those deeply concerned about the planet's future, advocating for radical measures to counter perceived imminent dangers. These grievances, whether grounded in reality or not, call for substantial societal shifts, often stemming from social injustices or inequalities.



Identities are multiple, subjective, and dynamic.

Despite varied ideologies, these movements depend on identity crises as a key driver of radicalization. By gaining a deeper understanding of the relationships between identity crisis and radicalization, and by uncovering broader radicalization patterns, this paper provides essential insights into the pathways that lead individuals to extremism across different ideological groups.

2 D. Gartenstein-Ross, A. Zammit, E. Chace-Donahue, and M. Urban, “Composite violent extremism: Conceptualizing attackers who increasingly challenge traditional categories of terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2023): 1-27.

UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE CONTEXT OF RADICALIZATION

Before discussing the concept of identity crisis, it's necessary to understand the meaning of 'identity' in the context of radicalization. All terrorist organizations claim to represent a particular group in society, defined by innate or inherited characteristics such as racial, ethnic, religious, ideological or social background.

These characteristics — and more importantly, the ways in which social groups assign meaning to them through stories and narratives about themselves and other groups perceived as being different — are gateways to sustained contact and socialization. They are key to understanding the origins of social beliefs and the diverse pathways to radicalization.

In people's lives, identities are multiple, subjective, and dynamic. However, terrorists often attempt to artificially construct fixed and static identities – through propaganda, narratives and stories shared online and among social groups – in ways that are con-

gruent with their political aims. For example, for the original Islamists who grew up mainly in the Middle East and North Africa and became active in the 1970s and 1980s, their sense of identity as Muslims fuelled their opposition to local governments.³

Having experienced state crackdown firsthand, their eyes were opened to the plight of other Muslims in Afghanistan, Palestine and other places.

Recognition of Muslim people's problems worldwide went hand in hand with the development of an increasingly globalized Islamist identity and the growing perception of an anti-Islamic stance in the 'far enemy' of the United States and its allies.⁴ This way, they crafted a simplistic 'us' versus 'them' mentality, creating the conditions for a perceived clash of identities.

³ O. Roy, "Globalized Islam: the search for a new Ummah," *Islamology* 7, no. 1 (2017): 11-40.

⁴ S. J. Mullins, "A systematic analysis of Islamist terrorism in the USA and UK: 2001-2008," 2010.

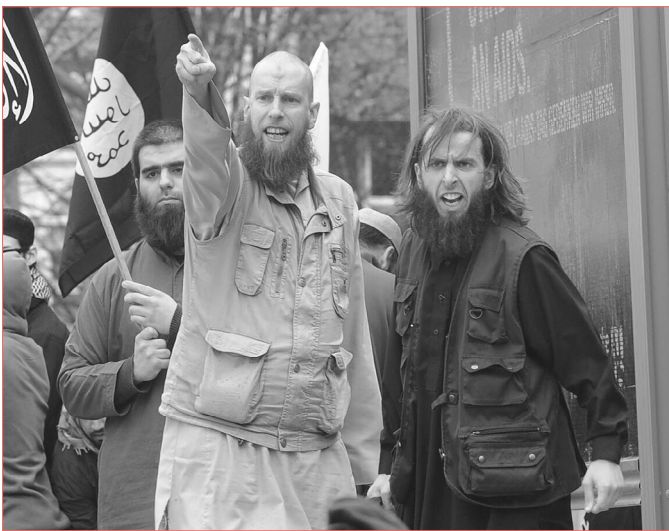


Right wing ideologies capitalize on feelings of disenfranchisement and apprehension regarding cultural and demographic changes, promoting a narrative of heritage and nationalism.

2.1

WHAT IS IDENTITY CRISIS?

Identity crises are experienced in various forms by a large number of people globally, and in most cases, they do not lead to radicalization. However, for a small minority of individuals, it can constitute a key moment in the journey towards extremist ideologies, often described as a 'cognitive opening' that leads — in conjunction with other factors and contexts — towards terrorist ideologies and groups. This concept, explored in numerous research studies and radicalization models looking at 'homegrown jihadists' (including those by the NYPD, Wiktorowicz, and Sageman), suggests that radicalization often originates from issues tied to identity management, typically characterized by a dissatisfaction with existing beliefs and the pursuit of new ones.⁵



Identity crises are experienced in various forms by a large number of people globally, and in most cases, they do not lead to radicalization. However, for a small minority of individuals, it can constitute a key moment in the journey towards extremist ideologies.

In contemporary Western societies, this is particularly relevant for the diverse and complex groups described in the introduction of this paper, which sometimes face discrimination but always grapple with the challenge of reconciling their Western identity with what they perceive to be a 'true' Muslim identity.⁶

Such individuals navigate through social psychological realms in search of meaning and certainty, often gravitating towards radical ideologies that offer a sense of belonging and identity. This underscores the pivotal role of identity crises in the process of radicalization.⁷

2.2

HOW DOES IDENTITY CRISIS LEAD TO RADICALIZATION?

Identity crisis is fundamentally a group socialization process.⁸ Through this process, individuals come to identify with a set of norms, which may endorse either violent or non-violent ideologies, via social interactions. These interactions amplify shared worldviews and experiences, such as social isolation, experiences of discrimination, feelings of alienation, pushing individuals towards groups that provide a sense of community and a clear path for action. At that point peer influence, through social networks and groups endorsing radical views, can steer individuals towards adopting these ideologies.

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INTERACTIONS.**

⁵ Q. Wiktorowicz, "Joining the cause: Al-Muhajiroun and radical Islam," in *The Roots of Radical Islam*, 1-29, 2004; Silber, M. D. & Bhatt, A. *Radicalization in the West: The homegrown threat*, 1-90 (2007, New York: Police Department); Sageman, M. *Leaderless jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century*. University of Pennsylvania Press (2011).

⁶ M. King and D. M. Taylor, "The radicalization of homegrown jihadists: A review of theoretical models and social psychological evidence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (2011): 602-622.

⁷ A. Kirby, "The London bombers as 'self-starters': A case study in indigenous radicalization and the emergence of autonomous cliques," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 5 (2007): 415-428; Stroink, M. L. "Processes and preconditions underlying terrorism in second-generation immigrants," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293-312.

⁸ L. G. Smith, L. Blackwood, and E. F. Thomas, "The need to refocus on the group as the site of radicalization," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 15, no. 2 (2020): 327-352.

UNDERSTANDING RADICALIZATION

This section introduces three fundamental theories that shape contemporary academic and policy understanding of radicalization, namely the Risk Analysis Framework, Social Identity Theory, and Significance Quest Theory, to explain how an identity crisis might — for some people — lead to radicalization.

3.1 RISK ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

The Risk Analysis Framework (RAF) developed by Noémie Bouhana and colleagues⁹ is informed by Situational Action Theory,¹⁰ which is widely used to understand various forms of criminal behaviours.

The RAF is a criminological model that views radicalization as a form of criminal propensity development, integrating causal factors across multiple levels (individual, situational, social ecological, systemic) to understand vulnerability to extremist violence.

The RAF helps us understand when and how struggling with personal identity issues can make someone more open to radicalization as they search for answers or solutions to their problems. It posits that vulnerability arises from the interplay of individual propensities, situational influences, and exposure to environments supportive of terrorism.

Firstly, certain individuals may have a higher propensity to identity crises due to psychological characteristics, such as low self-esteem, mental health challenges, and an unstable, incoherent sense of self.

These factors can increase receptivity to new identities, leading individuals to gravitate towards groups or ideologies that provide a defined sense of identity and purpose. Additionally, traits such as limited executive functioning, poor self-control, impulsivity, and a propensity for thrill-seeking can further elevate the risk of involvement in extremist violence.¹¹

While these individual predispositions are important in the radicalization process, they should not be seen as deterministic. In isolation, they do not fully account for why certain individuals pursue extremist violence. Not everyone with these psychological characteristics is predisposed to terrorism; rather these psychological predispositions indicate a vulnerability when coupled with situational influences and exposure to environments supportive of terrorism.

Secondly, the concept of situation refers to significant and recent life events that may alter individuals' lifestyles, preferences, and spheres of activity, potentially increasing their risk of encountering environments supportive of extremism. Certain events, such as experiencing discrimination, can trigger social isolation, intensifying feelings of alienation from mainstream society or one's immediate community. Previous research has often viewed changes in life circumstances as moments of cognitive openness to radical influences. However, situational factors should not be seen deterministically as causes of radicalization. Rather, they play a role when coupled with propensities and exposure to environments supportive of terrorism.

⁹ N. Bouhana, E. Corner, and P. Gill, *A Risk Analysis Framework of Lone-Actor Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹⁰ P. O. H. Wikström, "Why crime happens: A situational action theory," *Analytical Sociology*, 71-94, 2014.

¹¹ A. Nivette, M. Eisner, and D. Ribeaud, "Developmental predictors of violent extremist attitudes: A test of general strain theory," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 54, no. 6 (2017): 755-790.

For instance, peer influence can significantly shape how these situational events are interpreted and experienced by the individual.

Thirdly, exposure to extremism-supportive settings involves the people, places, and materials that can influence individuals predisposed to radicalization through situational selection.

An identity crisis can shift personal needs and preferences, making individuals more susceptible to these influences. This heightened susceptibility facilitates attachment to extremist entities and immersion in radical moral norms and ideologies. In this context, exposure is operationalized to identify key elements of radicalizing environments, highlighting how identity crises can lead individuals to seek out and be more receptive to extremist ideologies.

For example, extremist groups often propagate narratives that frame the in-group as victims of injustice, resonating with individuals undergoing an identity crisis by providing a clear enemy and a cause to rally around. The promise of a better future or a return to a glorified past can be particularly appealing to those in the midst of an identity crisis, offering a clear direction and purpose.

The emphasis on certain aspects of identity (e.g., religion, race, ethnicity, nationalism) is often cynically exploited by extremist groups to attract individuals seeking clarity and pride in their identity.

3.2 SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that individuals derive self-esteem from their affiliations with various social groups, leading to a positive or negative self-evaluation based on these associations.¹²

¹² M. A. Hogg, *Social Identity Theory* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 3-17.

Central to SIT is the concept of social identity, a person's sense of who they are based on their group memberships. Whether these groups are defined by nationality, political affiliation, religion, or other social categories, the theory highlights the human tendency to categorize oneself and others into groups.

The significance and value assigned to these groups are relative, often contingent upon comparisons with other groups. Identification with a highly esteemed group can enhance self-esteem, reinforcing a positive self-concept.¹³

Identity crises, marked by threats to or strains on one's self-esteem and group identity, can propel individuals towards more extreme group identifications.¹⁴ According to SIT, when individuals experience a threat to their self-esteem or group identity, they may intensify their affiliation with their in-group, exhibiting increased loyalty and potentially aggression towards out-groups. This heightened in-group solidarity and out-group antagonism are fundamental to understanding the psychological underpinnings of radicalization.¹⁵

Identity threats may arise from societal changes, personal transitions, or collective grievances, leading individuals to seek refuge and validation within more homogeneous and often radical groups.¹⁶ These groups offer not only a sense of belonging but also a framework for interpreting the world and one's place in it, thereby fulfilling the need for positive distinctiveness.¹⁷

¹³ L. Huddy, "From social to political identity: A critical examination of social identity theory," *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2001): 127-156.

¹⁴ M. Vergani, E. M. Tacchi, "When Catholics turn right: the effects of the Islamic terrorism threat on the fragmented Catholic Italian voters," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42, no. 11 (2016): 1885-1903.

¹⁵ N. R. Branscombe, N. Ellemers, R. Spears, and B. Doosje, "The context and content of social identity threat," in *Social Identity: Context, Commitment, Content*, 35-58, 1999.

¹⁶ W. G. Stephan, C. L. Renfro, and M. D. Davis, "The role of threat in intergroup relations," in *Improving Intergroup Relations: Building on the Legacy of Thomas F. Pettigrew*, 55-72, 2008.

¹⁷ M. Vergani, "How is terrorism changing us?" (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

SIT suggests that social identities are multifaceted and vary in salience depending on the context and individual differences. For some, certain aspects of their identity, such as religion, race or ethnicity, may take precedence and shape their interactions and affiliations more significantly than others. The context in which individuals find themselves can dramatically influence the salience of particular group memberships. High levels of identification with a group can lead to more pronounced in-group favouritism and out-group hostility, especially in the face of threats that are perceived to target the group directly.¹⁸

3.3 SIGNIFICANCE QUEST THEORY

Significance Quest Theory (SQT) also provides a compelling framework for understanding the psychological trajectory from experiencing an identity crisis to radicalization. SQT posits that the quest for significance can be triggered either by a deprivation of significance (e.g., through rejection or failure) or by an opportunity to achieve recognition (e.g., through heroic acts). This dual pathway suggests that individuals may seek to restore their sense of worth either by avoiding situations that diminish their significance or by actively pursuing actions that enhance it. The theory also emphasises the importance of cultural narratives, which spell out the behaviours and attributes that confer significance, thereby guiding individuals on how to attain respect and worth within their communities.¹⁹

In practice, the radicalization process can thus be seen as an interplay between an individual's need for significance, the narratives that define how significance can be achieved, and the networks that reinforce these narratives. When individuals find themselves in situations where their quest

for significance is thwarted, they may turn to radical ideologies that promise a swift restoration of their worth through engagement in a perceived noble cause. This process is facilitated by networks that validate the radical narratives and offer social support, making the path towards radicalization not just an ideological shift but a deeply personal quest for dignity and respect.²⁰

An identity crisis can emerge from various sources such as social exclusion, discrimination, or significant life transitions, leading individuals to question their place and value in society. When individuals face an identity crisis, their quest for significance is intensified as they grapple with feelings of insignificance and a loss of self-worth. This deprivation can result from the erosion of one's social status, humiliation, or the realization that one's identity does not align with societal values or expectations. SQT suggests such experiences activate a profound psychological need to restore or enhance one's sense of significance.

SQT's emphasis on the role of networks in reinforcing the quest for significance explains how individuals, once exposed to radical ideologies, find themselves further entrenched. These networks, whether online communities or physical groups, provide the social validation and support that individuals seek in times of identity crisis. By embedding the individual within a community that values the radical cause, the network serves to continually reinforce his/her/new identity and the associated narrative of significance through radicalization. The appeal of radical groups, therefore, lies not only in the ideologies they propagate but also in their ability to meet the psychological needs highlighted by SQT.

18 A. G. Greenwald and T. F. Pettigrew, "With malice toward none and charity for some: ingroup favoritism enables discrimination," *American Psychologist* 69, no. 7 (2014): 669.
19 A. W. Kruglanski, E. Molinaro, K. Jasko, D. Webber, N. P. Leander, and A. Pierro, "Significance-quest theory," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 17, no. 4 (2022): 1050-1071.

20 J. J. Bélanger, M. Moyano, H. Muhammad, L. Richardson, M. A. K. Lafrenière, P. McCaffery, et al., "Radicalization leading to violence: A test of the 3N model," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (2019): 42.

Radical Islamist ideology is a reaction to threatened social identity. It is framed as a defensive measure against perceived assaults on the Muslim world by Western powers, with a narrative of a lost Islamic glory and a rejection of modernization.²¹ Although Islamist identity has broad appeal, offering solutions to a variety of problems, only a minuscule minority of Muslims in the West experiencing identity crises find the answer in terrorism.

This section of the paper discusses the empirical evidence that helps us understand how and when issues with personal identity might lead to people becoming involved in terrorism. One major methodological challenge these studies face is the near impossibility of directly examining the psychology of individuals involved in extremist violence or terrorism during the radicalization process. This is because such individuals are rare and unlikely to participate in psychological studies during this period in their lives. To overcome this challenge, researchers use alternative measures or proxy variables. These are indicators that suggest someone might be experiencing uncertainty about who they are or where they fit in society. In this section, we examine research using two key measures that are relevant to understanding identity crisis: Alienation and anomia.

4.1 ALIENATION

Alienation happens when there's a mismatch or disconnection between what people are experiencing in their lives and what they wish to achieve, either emotionally, physically, or in terms of their goals or

state of being. This mismatch can be explained in different ways. It may stem from unrealistic material desires, unmet basic human needs, the difference between how things are and how we wish they were, or a sense of frustration when comparing our current state to a past or ideal one. The concept of alienation is important to understand because feeling alienated can lead to an identity crisis. When people feel alienated, they often start questioning their role and identity in society more deeply. This can drive them to actively out their sense of belonging and purpose – which is generally a positive process for most people striving for happiness, although it can rarely lead some to terrorism.

ALIENATION FROM KEY SOCIAL FRAMEWORKS CAN LEAD TO NEGATIVE ATTITUDES.

The connection between feelings of alienation and the propensity towards violence has been a focal point of study within social psychology. Evidence suggests that various forms of alienation, such as feeling racially isolated or separated from the rest of society, is closely tied to an increased willingness to engage in violent actions, particularly when individuals experience feelings of powerlessness and frustration.²² Additional research indicates that alienation from key social frameworks — including educational institutions, family units, and peer groups — can lead to negative attitudes characterized by a search for excitement and a predisposition towards aggression.²³

21 M. L. Stroink "Processes and preconditions underlying terrorism in second-generation immigrants," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293-312.

22 E. H. Ransford, "Isolation, Powerlessness, and Violence: A Study of Attitudes and Participation in the Watts Riot," *American Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 5 (1968): 581-591.
23 M. D. Slater "Alienation, Aggression, and Sensation Seeking as Predictors of Adolescent Use of Violent Film, Computer, and Website Content," *Journal of Communication* 53, no. 1 (2006): 105-121.

A study by Reijntjes et al²⁴ demonstrated that for Dutch youths, feelings of alienation could heighten aggressive responses to being rejected by peers. There's also anecdotal evidence suggesting that individuals involved in lone-actor terrorist activities often experience considerable alienation and struggle to integrate into society. Factors such as a lack of socialization and meaningful relationships during formative years have been associated with a tendency towards so-called 'lone-wolf' behaviour,²⁵ underscoring the possible link between feelings of alienation and extremism. Further supporting this notion is research linking a sense of alienation from one's own country with support for violent acts.²⁶ This body of work collectively highlights the significant role that alienation can play in influencing not only individual attitudes and behaviours but also broader societal outcomes related to violence and extremism.

Vergani et al²⁷ provide empirical evidence that alienation makes young people more vulnerable to adopting extremist worldviews. Their study sheds light on the behavior of young Indonesian Muslims in Australia. When confronted with thoughts of their mortality, those who felt more alienated exhibited a greater inclination towards extremism compared to their less alienated counterparts.

This suggests alienation not only affects individuals on its own but also amplifies the impact of other factors, such as exposure to life-threatening situations or extremist ideologies, making alienated individuals more susceptible to extremist recruitment and ideology.

However, Vergani et al²⁸ also indicates that feelings of exclusion or rejection do not necessarily alter an individual's sense of alienation or support for extremist views, suggesting that alienation, or a lack thereof, is a deeply ingrained aspect of an individual's identity. This stability contrasts with previous research that successfully manipulated feelings of political and social alienation,²⁹ underscoring the complexity of alienation's role in radicalisation.

Despite the notable limitations, including the challenges of generalizing results from small samples to the wider population and acknowledging potential biases, the consistency across findings underscores the potential role of alienation in radicalization. Supported by theories like the Significance Quest Theory, alienation — coupled with external pressures and the opportunity for meaningful relationships within extremist groups — may prompt individuals towards violence and extremism as a means to regain a sense of importance and community. While these observations hint at alienation's role in the journey toward radicalization, the intricate nature of radicalization and the challenge of discerning cause from correlation mean that alienation cannot be definitively singled out as a stand-alone risk factor explaining why individuals radicalize to terrorism.

4.2 ANOMIA

The concept of anomie, as introduced by Durkheim in 1897 through his analysis of suicide, delineates a societal disorder characterized by the weakening or loss of social norms, leading individuals to detach from society and disregard previously accepted moral and social norms.

24 A. Reijntjes, S. T., B. J. Bushman, P. A. Boelen, B. Orabio de Castro, and M. J. Telch, "The Outcast-Lash-Out Effect in Youth: Alienation Increases Aggression Following Peer Rejection," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 10 (2010): 1394-1398.

25 J. Scott and D. Spaniel, *The Wound Collectors: Profiling the Self Radicalized Lone-Wolf Terrorists* (Washington, DC: Institute for Critical Infrastructure Technology, 2016).

26 J. J. Bélanger, M. Moyano, H. Muhammad, L. Richardson, M. A. K. Lafrenière, P. McCaffery, et al., "Radicalization leading to violence: A test of the 3N model," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (2019): 42; W. Charkawi, K. Dunn, and A. M. Bluc, "The influences of social identity and perceptions of injustice on support to violent extremism," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2020): 1-20.

27 M. Vergani, M. Iqbal, K. O'Brien, P. Lentini, and G. Barton, "Examining the relationship between alienation and radicalization into violent extremism," in *Islam and Security in the West*, 115-138 (2021).

28 M. Vergani, M. Iqbal, K. O'Brien, P. Lentini, and G. Barton, "Examining the relationship between alienation and radicalization into violent extremism," in *Islam and Security in the West*, 115-138 (2021).

29 J. J. Bélanger, M. Moyano, H. Muhammad, L. Richardson, M. A. K. Lafrenière, P. McCaffery, et al., "Radicalization leading to violence: A test of the 3N model," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (2019): 42.

This condition of normlessness, or 'anomie' at a societal level, finds its psychological equivalent in 'anomia'. Anomia is an individual's psychological response to societal anomie, manifesting as a disconnection from societal values and norms, culminating in a state where life feels purposeless, and actions seem inconsequential.³⁰

This condition is further described through overwhelming feelings of meaninglessness, a sense of inconsequential actions, alienation from societal values, and a perception of unregulated societal norms.³¹

Research has linked anomia to several adverse outcomes in society. This includes a rise in skepticism towards the law, known as legal cynicism, and an increased inclination towards extremist violence. Studies have shown that people experiencing anomia are likely to adopt more negative views, distrust groups within society, and are more prone to support or even engage in acts of extremist violence.³² A specific aspect of this relationship is how a perceived lack of societal norms, or normlessness, can lead individuals to justify engaging in behaviours that are generally considered undesirable, as a means to achieve personal objectives.³³

Research by Adam-Troian et al³⁴ has reinforced the critical role that anomia plays in fostering intentions of engaging in terrorism or in extremist violence. This study found that its impact extends across different cultural backgrounds and political beliefs, operating by diminishing one's sense of sig-

nificance or purpose. Importantly, the research distinguishes between the concepts of anomia and the loss of significance. Despite their close relationship, evidenced by moderate correlations, these are distinct constructs that interact in complex ways to influence individuals' behaviours and attitudes towards extremism.³⁵

Rotweiller and colleagues³⁶ conducted a study to understand how people perceive their own powerlessness within society, their sense of a lack of social norms, and the perceived insignificance of what society traditionally values and expects. They did this by asking participants of a large survey how much they agreed with statements that reflected these feelings. The results showed that quick changes in society can significantly alter how individuals align with societal norms and values. This study revealed a noteworthy connection between the pressures felt by individuals and communities (collective strains) and a personal sense of anomia, which is the feeling of being adrift in a society because the usual norms don't seem to apply anymore.

Furthermore, it highlighted how these pressures can lead individuals to view the law and societal rules with skepticism (legal cynicism). Essentially, Rotweiller and their team found that this sense of anomia acts as a bridge, transforming personal and collective challenges into a weakened belief in the importance and relevance of legal and moral standards. This insight helps us understand how rapid societal changes can influence individuals' orientation towards societal norms and legal systems, making them more cynical about the law and its role in their lives.

30 S. Legge, E. Davidov, and P. Schmidt, "Social Structural Effects on the Level and Development of the Individual Experience of Anomie in the German Population," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 2, no. 2 (2008): 248–267.

31 R. K. Merton, "Social structure and anomie," *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 5 (1938): 672–682, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2084686>.

32 K. Boehnke, J. Hagan, and H. Merken, "Right-wing extremism among German adolescents: Risk factors and protective factors," *Applied Psychology* 47, no. 1 (1998): 109–126, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1998.tb00016.x>; N. Schils and L. J. Pauwels, "Political violence and the mediating role of violent extremist propensities," *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 2 (2016): 72–91, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.9.2>.

33 R. K. Merton, "Social structure and anomie," *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 5 (1938): 672–682, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2084686>.

34 J. Adam-Troian, E. Bonetto, M. Araujo, O. Baidada, E. Celebi, M. Dono Martin, et al., "Positive associations between anomia and intentions to engage in political violence: Cross-cultural evidence from four countries," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 26, no. 2 (2020): 217–223, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000385>.

35 J. Troian, O. Baidada, T. Arciszewski, T. Apostolidis, E. Celebi, and T. Yurtbakan, "Evidence for indirect loss of significance effects on violent extremism: The potential mediating role of anomia," *Aggressive Behavior* 45, no. 6 (2019): 691–703, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21863>.

36 B. Rotweiller, P. Gill, and N. Bouhana, "Individual and environmental explanations for violent extremist intentions: A German nationally representative survey study," *Justice Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2022): 825–846.

COMPARATIVE VIEW OF RADICALIZATION FACTORS ACROSS NORTH AMERICA, EUROPE AND AUSTRALIA

This section aims to present exploratory insights regarding potential differences among Islamist extremists in Western nations, grounded in the best available comparative data. Importantly, there are challenges inherent in comparing data on radical Islamists in the West, derived from studies concentrating solely on individual countries because of the varied methodologies employed. Differences observed between Islamists in distinct studies may stem from these methodological variations rather than genuine disparities in behaviour or ideology.

Another bias pertains to the unique cultural, social, and political contexts of each country, which can influence Islamists' motivations and actions in country-specific ways. The factors leading to extremism in one nation may not apply in another, given these contextual differences. Consequently, this analysis will concentrate on the scarce but insightful comparative studies of radical Islamists across Western nations. These studies offer insights that transcend the limitations of single-country research by providing a more comprehensive comparative understanding of counter-specific radicalization pathways.

Elena Pokalova³⁷ examined factors that might be connected with the outflow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, analyzing a database of 33,815 foreign fighters from 103 countries. The study suggests economic conditions, notably unemployment and Human Development Index (HDI) levels, are in significant correlation to the number of for-

eign fighters from these regions. In Europe and North America, higher HDI and unemployment rates are associated with greater numbers of foreign fighters. This suggests that not only broader economic conditions but also personal economic crises can contribute to radicalization.

Furthermore, demographic factors such as the youth percentage and religious diversity are significant. The youth variable becomes statistically important in further models, indicating that younger populations in these countries may experience identity crises that contribute to radicalization. For majority non-Muslim countries, higher religious and linguistic diversity correlates with more foreign fighters, suggesting that in these diverse societies, identity crises might also be more pronounced.



Not only broader economic conditions but also personal economic crises can contribute to radicalization.

Internet penetration is another crucial factor, with higher levels linked to increased radicalization. This could indicate that identity crises are exacerbated by online influences, which are prevalent in Western countries with high internet usage.

³⁷ E. Pokalova, "Driving factors behind foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 9 (2018): 798-818.

The presence of terrorist networks is also highlighted as a significant factor in the radicalization process in non-Muslim majority countries, suggesting that the influence of global terrorist networks can compound local identity crises and contribute to the decision to become a foreign fighter.

A study conducted by Harris-Hogan et al³⁸ focusing on Islamist radicalization in Australia and Canada shows that both countries experience unique challenges shaped by their specific socio-political environments. Australia, with its strict immigration policies and geographic isolation, faces issues primarily among immigrant youths who grapple with dual cultural identities, often leading to a crisis of belonging.

Conversely, Canada, while also dealing with challenges among immigrant populations, has a more pronounced issue with social integration and the cultural dissonance faced by second-generation immigrants. This group often encounters challenges that exacerbate identity conflicts, driving some towards extremist ideologies as a means of asserting identity and gaining a sense of community.

Australia has predominantly seen a sharp rise in domestic extremists post-Daesh, with a significant percentage being young, homegrown individuals who radicalized locally despite their diverse backgrounds. In Canada, although there has been a lower rate of increase in Daesh-inspired plots, there's been broader involvement in international jihadist plots, with a wider age range of radicals. This suggests a distinct form of identity struggle, possibly linked to global ideological movements rather than solely domestic concerns.

Importantly, Canada's approach has involved significant actions against individuals supporting international terrorism, contrasting with Australia's focus on homegrown threats.

Lorne L. Dawson³⁹ conducted a comparative analysis of the data on Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, highlighting important differences between countries. In Europe, a significant proportion of foreign fighters emerge from lower socio-economic backgrounds, characterized by limited education and high unemployment. This contrasts sharply with data from North America and, to some extent, the United Kingdom, where foreign fighters do not consistently fit this 'low prospects' model.



In a video that appeared in December 2014, Abu Anwar Al Canadi ("the Canadian"), identified in Canadian news reports as Ottawa native John Maguire, threatened Canadians with "indiscriminate" attacks if they continue to take part in the anti-Daesh campaign.

The notion of relative deprivation plays a critical role here, suggesting that feelings of marginalization and unfulfilled expectations are more pivotal than absolute poverty in driving radicalization. Additionally, the linkage between criminality and terrorism is suggested but remains inadequately documented. Contrary to the minimal role often attributed to religion, recent research emphasizes the significance of religiosity in motivating Western foreign fighters. This highlights a complex interplay of socio-economic factors, personal religious convictions, and individual experiences of exclusion, which collectively influence the pathway towards radicalization in differing national contexts.

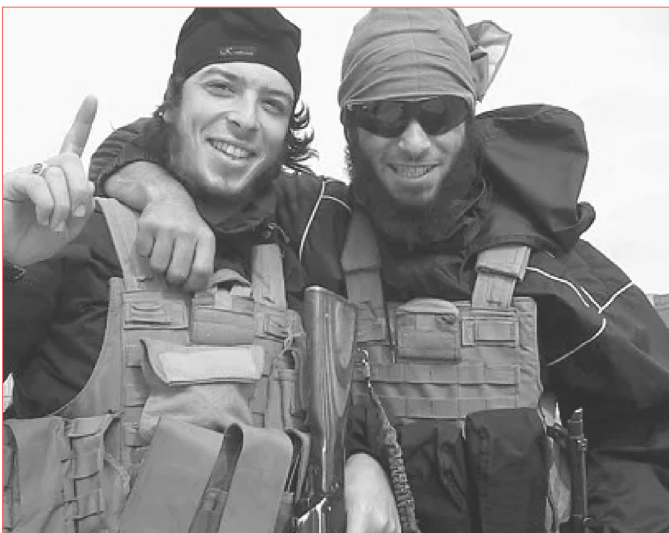
38 S. Harris-Hogan, L. L. Dawson, and A. Amarasingam, "A comparative analysis of the nature and evolution of the domestic jihadist threat to Australia and Canada (2000–2020)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 5 (2020): 77–102.

39 L. L. Dawson, "A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?," ICCT Research Paper, February 2021, DOI: 10.19156/2021.1.02.

HOW EXTREMIST GROUPS EXPLOIT IDENTITY CRISES

The declaration of a “caliphate” by Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi in 2014 marked a significant shift in the dynamics of global terrorism, positioning Daesh as a formidable entity within the movement. Despite the military recapture of its territories, Daesh continues to exert influence through clever utilization of social media to foster a distinct group identity. This digital competence facilitates the formation of a cohesive community, resonating with individuals feeling disconnected or disenfranchised, thereby making the ideology attractive. Such strategic communication not only promotes a sense of belonging but also a clear purpose by delineating an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narrative. This framework leverages historical grievances and perceived injustices to strengthen bonds among followers, intensifying their commitment to Daesh’s cause.

This section discusses key studies showing how terrorist groups – in particular Daesh and Al Qaida – cynically construct and exploit identity crises, such as people’s vulnerabilities, needs, search for meaning, and belonging, for recruitment purposes.



One method employed by groups such as Daesh involves the strategic use of language and education to forge a strong collective identity.

6.1 CONSTRUCTING AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY

Extremist groups often exploit identity crises to recruit individuals into their ranks by manipulating emotions and social identities. This process is rooted in the construction of a shared identity that resonates deeply with potential recruits, particularly those experiencing feelings of alienation or disenfranchisement. A study by Caló et al,⁴⁰ suggests that one method employed by groups such as Daesh involves the strategic use of language and education to forge a strong collective identity. Using Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’, the study suggests that Daesh manipulates language to create a sense of unity and distinctiveness.

For example, Daesh’s translation of propaganda into various languages and the development of multilingual magazines like *Ishtok* are tactics designed to reach a diverse audience and foster a sense of belonging. The use of specific terminologies and narratives in their communications serves to both include insiders and exclude outsiders, reinforcing group boundaries and enhancing solidarity among members.

Education acts as another critical tool for Daesh, functioning as a means of cultural transmission and ideological indoctrination. By establishing educational programs that disseminate their interpretation of history and religion, Daesh embeds its members within an ideological framework that justifies their actions and goals.

40 B. Caló, D. Malet, L. Howie, and P. Lentini, “Islamic Caliphate or nation state? Investigating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’s imagined community,” *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 3 (2020): 727-742.

This education is not limited to formal settings but extends into the digital realm, where Daesh leverages social media and online platforms to reach a global audience. The content is tailored to resonate with the grievances and ideological leanings of potential recruits, making it a powerful element of recruitment strategy.

6.2 OFFERING AVENUES FOR SIGNIFICANCE

Radical groups exploit identity crises by leveraging the psychological needs for significance, certainty, and relatedness. A striking example of this dynamic is provided by Atran,⁴¹ who analysed foreign fighters joining Daesh. His study reveals how these individuals often felt alienated within their own societies, lacking a sense of purpose. Daesh offered them a narrative promising significance through the defence of Islam and the establishment of a utopian Islamic state. This narrative appealed directly to their need for a meaningful identity, promising recognition and a sense of belonging. Similar findings emerge from the analysis of the case of the Boston Marathon bombers by Sageman⁴², who notes how extremist narratives portraying the West as at war with Islam convinced them that their violent actions would secure them a respected place within their community and beyond. This reflects how radical groups craft narratives that offer a pathway to restore dignity and significance, tapping into personal grievances and broader geopolitical narratives.⁴³ Dawson⁴⁴ provides a detailed account of Omar Khadr, a Canadian detained at Guantanamo Bay, who turned towards radical Islam following experiences of alienation and injustice. Dawson's study highlights how radical groups present them-

selves as a means to regain dignity and significance, exploiting personal crises and experiences of discrimination or exclusion. The use of social media platforms by Daesh to spread their narrative and create virtual communities is detailed in Berger and Morgan's⁴⁵ report for the Brookings Institution. This study illustrates the crucial role of networks in reinforcing radical ideologies, where social media serves not just to introduce and reinforce ideologies but also to offer validation and a sense of belonging to isolated individuals. Hafez⁴⁶ in his work *Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq*, explores the narrative of martyrdom promoted by jihadist groups. Such narratives promise personal significance through sacrifice, appealing powerfully to individuals feeling marginalized. Hafez's analysis shows how the promise of martyrdom can convince individuals their actions will have a profound impact.

6.3 SELECTIVE APPROPRIATION OF RELIGIOUS TEXTS

Mahood and Rane⁴⁷ conducted a study of Daesh recruitment propaganda focusing on the selective appropriation of religious narratives into their propaganda. This strategic use of religion is aimed not merely at indoctrination but at fulfilling deeper emotional and social needs among potential recruits. Daesh's propaganda is tailored to resonate on these emotional levels, offering a new identity framed within the context of a glorified religious and political mission. The narratives often portray the extremist group as a defender of the faith against perceived injustices and oppression, painting a simplistic 'us' versus 'them' scenario that is particularly appealing to those experiencing personal or collective grievances. In this light, the group's media productions portray an idealised version of life under their rule, often omitting the harsh realities.

41 S. Atran, "The devoted actor: Unconditional commitment and intractable conflict across cultures," *Current Anthropology* 57, suppl. 13 (2016): S192-S203.

42 Sageman, M. "Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century." University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

43 M. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

44 L. L. Dawson, "A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?," ICCT Research Paper, February 2021, DOI: 10.19156/2021.1.02.

45 J. M. Berger and J. Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter," 2015.

46 M. M. Hafez, "Martyrdom mythology in Iraq: How jihadists frame suicide terrorism in videos and biographies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 1 (2007): 95-115.

47 Mahood and H. Rane, "Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda," *The Journal of International Communication* 23, no. 1 (2017): 15-35.

This selective presentation can make the idea of joining such groups appealing to those who feel alienated or oppressed, making them more susceptible to radicalization.

Mahood and Rane's⁴⁸ study finds that this strategic manipulation is evident in their media outputs, such as the Dabiq magazine and various films including 'Flames of War. These materials are tailored to resonate with young Muslims in Western countries, using English language to ensure accessibility and wider dissemination. The content is rich with apocalyptic imagery and selectively references Islamic texts like the Quran and Hadith, positioning Daesh's actions within a divine framework, and emphasizing a narrative of inevitable and escalating conflict. Daesh's propaganda often revisits historical grievances and apocalyptic predictions to frame their military actions as part of a cosmic battle foretold in religious texts, which is appealing to individuals feeling disconnected or disenfranchised from their communities, with low self-esteem and sense of purpose in life. The magazines and films employ themes of crusade and jihad, portrayed as defensive measures against perceived attacks on Islam.

WHILE DAESH'S VIOLENT PROPAGANDA WAS PROMINENT, IT WAS THE NON-VIOLENT MESSAGES THAT WERE MORE EFFECTIVE IN GENERATING ONLINE SUPPORT.

This narrative is woven with Islamic eschatology to a sense of justice and heroism. For instance, the frequent references to Dabiq, a site of prophesied battle, underscores this blend of prophecy and current affairs,

making the narrative more compelling. This strategic use of religious and historical narratives not only helps to justify their acts but also aims to attract recruits by offering them a part in a grand, divine script.

It is important to remember that not everyone reacts in the same way to the propaganda of terrorist groups. A study by Mitts et al.⁴⁹ found that Daesh's use of propaganda on social media platforms played a significant role in influencing user reactions, with varying impacts depending on the nature of the content. By utilizing machine learning algorithms to detect recruitment messages and track their dissemination and reception on Twitter, researchers were able to identify that messages highlighting the material and social benefits of joining Daesh garnered increased support for the group. In contrast, content that depicted brutal violence tended to decrease overall endorsement of Daesh, except among its most extreme supporters. This pattern suggests that while Daesh's violent propaganda was prominent, it was the non-violent messages that were more effective in generating online support, pointing to a nuanced response based on the thematic content of the propaganda.

Responses to Daesh propaganda also varied significantly based on users' prior levels of engagement with the group.⁵⁰ Propaganda that combined violent and non-violent themes did not increase support when violent imagery was present, indicating that the presence of violence could neutralize the potential appeal of positive messaging among broader audiences. This complexity in reaction was also evident in the long-term engagement on the platform, where users who had previously interacted with violent content did not show increased support for non-violent messages subsequently.

48 Mahood and H. Rane, "Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda," *The Journal of International Communication* 23, no. 1 (2017): 15-35.

49 T. Mitts, G. Phillips, and B. F. Walter, "Studying the impact of ISIS propaganda campaigns," *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 2 (2022): 1220-1225.

50 T. Mitts, G. Phillips, and B. F. Walter, "Studying the impact of ISIS propaganda campaigns," *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 2 (2022): 1220-1225.

DIFFERENCES IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF AL QAIDA'S AND DAESH'S PROPAGANDA

Vergani and Bliuc⁵¹ conducted a comparative study of Daesh's Dabiq and Al Qaida's Inspire magazines, suggesting significant linguistic and psychological differences in the propaganda materials, as analyzed through the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) and Recursive Inspection of Text (RIOT) Scan. These differences suggest varied approaches in addressing and exacerbating identity crises among Western followers. Dabiq and Inspire both target Western audiences yet employ distinct psychological tactics that mirror their unique ideological narratives and recruitment strategies.

The study indicates that Dabiq employs a language that significantly underscores religious authority and purity, potentially appealing more to individuals experiencing identity crises by offering a clear, albeit extreme, sense of belonging and purpose. In contrast, Inspire uses a simpler language focusing on injustice and rebellion, which might reflect a different strategic approach to influence its audience.

Further analysis reveals that the language of Dabiq resonates with individuals exhibiting higher levels of authoritarianism and religiosity, suggesting that Daesh's propaganda is finely tuned to exploit and exacerbate identity crises among these particular psychological profiles. The distinct psychological underpinnings in the language used by these publications suggest that Daesh's approach could potentially be more impactful on individuals undergoing severe identity crises, as it provides not only a clear enemy but also a stringent ideological purity that demands unwavering loyalty and offers a rigid religious identity. This stark, authoritative language aligns closely with the psychological needs of individuals seeking clarity and direction during personal upheavals, making Daesh propaganda potentially more appealing to them. This targeted psychological engagement is crucial for understanding the recruitment and mobilization strategies of terrorist groups and underscores the importance of addressing the underlying psychological needs they exploit.

⁵¹ M. Vergani and A. M. Bliuc, "The language of new terrorism: Differences in psychological dimensions of communication in Dabiq and Inspire," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 37, no. 5 (2018): 523-540.



Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili, known by his nom de guerre Abu Omar Al Shishani was a Chechen extremist who served as the 'Minister of War' for Daesh. He was previously a sergeant in the Georgian Army, and was killed in 2016.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To minimize the impact of identity crises on the radicalization process, it is essential to develop interventions that address the fundamental causes of these crises and provide alternative pathways to achieving significance. Here are the recommendations:

- **Community engagement:** Strengthen community bonds and foster a sense of belonging among individuals. Initiatives should focus on creating community programs that encourage social integration and provide support networks, reducing the feeling of alienation that can lead to identity crises.
- **Promoting inclusive narratives:** Develop and disseminate inclusive narratives through education, media, and public policies that celebrate diversity and promote understanding across different cultural, religious, and ethnic groups. This aims to counteract the divisive narratives that often drive individuals towards extremist ideologies.
- **Recognition and respect through positive channels:** Establish platforms where individuals can gain recognition and respect without resorting to radical groups. This could include leadership programs, mentorship opportunities, and community service projects that highlight positive contributions to society.
- **Educational programs:** Implement educational interventions that focus on critical thinking and emotional intelligence to help young people navigate their identity development more effectively. Education should also include information on the risks associated with extremist ideologies and teach strategies for resilience against radicalization.
- **Rigorous research and evaluations:** Support research and impact evaluations to further understand the psychological mechanisms behind radicalization (e.g., the quest for significance) and how it relates to identity crises. This research should inform the development and evaluation of targeted interventions that address specific psychological needs.
- **Policy development informed by broad extremism contexts:** Stakeholders should consider the broad spectrum of extremism, acknowledging that radicalization can stem from various ideological, cultural, and social contexts. A nuanced understanding of these contexts will enable the development of tailored, effective interventions.
- **Integrated approach to research, policy and practice:** Ensure that research, policies and interventions are cohesively integrated across different levels of government and society. This integrated approach should involve collaboration between educators, community leaders, law enforcement, and mental health professionals.

By focusing on these areas, policymakers and community leaders can develop a robust framework to prevent radicalization. This approach recognizes the complex psychological underpinnings of radicalization and aims to provide proactive, inclusive, and informed solutions.

CONCLUSION

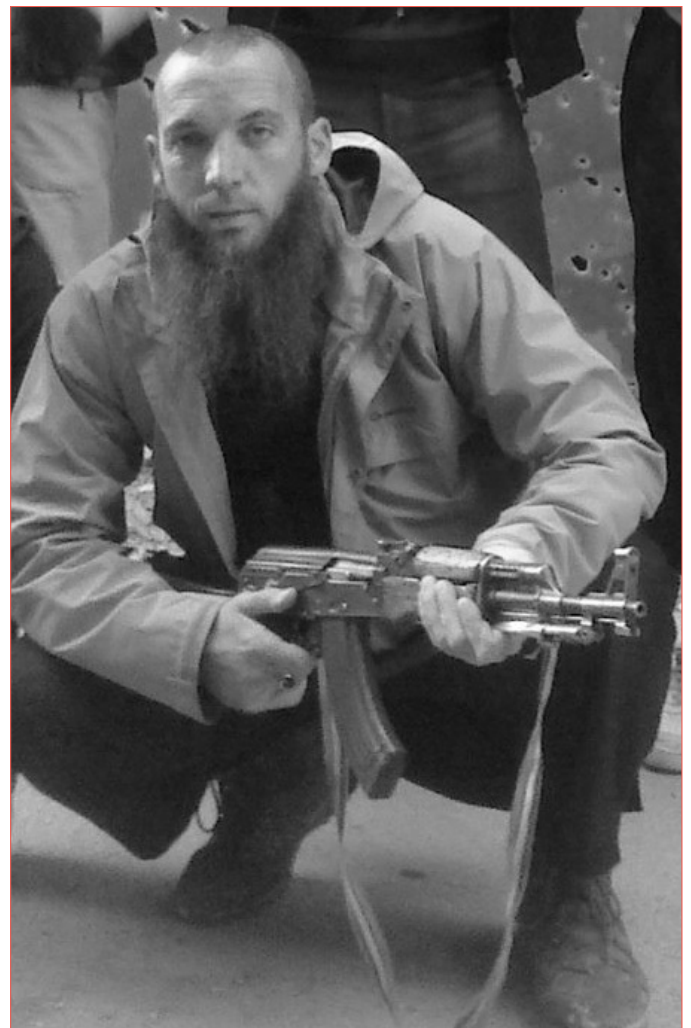
Identity crises play a critical role in the radicalization process within Western contexts. The in-depth analysis of radical Islamism, particularly through the lens of groups like Al Qaida and Daesh, reveals that identity crises serve as pivotal moments that can push individuals toward violent extremism. A key finding of this paper is that radicalization often stems from an individual's struggle with their identity and societal role. This struggle is magnified by feelings of alienation, discrimination, and a perceived lack of belonging or recognition within their communities. These factors can lead to a vulnerability where extremist ideologies that promise identity, community, and a sense of purpose become appealing.

Empirical studies highlighted in our study demonstrate that not only direct experiences of discrimination and alienation contribute to this vulnerability, but also broader societal changes and perceived threats to one's group identity. Such perceptions can intensify feelings of disenfranchisement, particularly among young people and second-generation immigrants who face complex identity negotiations. The manipulative strategies of terrorist groups exploit these identity crises effectively.

By offering clear, albeit destructive, pathways to regain significance and community, groups like Daesh and Al Qaida construct appealing narratives that resonate with those experiencing deep personal crises. These groups offer not only a sense of belonging but also a narrative that frames their members as key players in a larger cosmic battle, thus providing a powerful incentive for joining their cause.

The role of digital media in spreading extremist propaganda cannot be understated. It has become a critical tool for extremist groups to broaden their reach and appeal to individuals undergoing identity crises in Western societies. These platforms allow for the rapid dissemination of powerful and resonant messages that can influence individuals at vulnerable moments in their identity formation.

The findings of this paper also underscore the necessity of multi-faceted policy responses that address the root causes of radicalisation linked to identity crises.



By offering clear, albeit destructive, pathways to regain significance and community, groups like Daesh and Al Qaida construct appealing narratives that resonate with those experiencing deep personal crises.

Community engagement, inclusive narratives, and targeted educational programs are vital in providing alternative avenues for individuals to find community and significance without resorting to extremism.

Additionally, continuous research into the social and psychological dynamics of radicalisation is essential for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies. It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations inherent in existing research on radicalisation linked to identity crises. Many studies rely on small, non-representative samples or specific case studies, which may not be broadly generalisable across different populations and contexts. Additionally, the dynamic and evolving nature of extremist ideologies and their adoption means that findings can become outdated as new trends emerge. Therefore, caution must be exercised in generalizing these findings too broadly.

It is also important to note that a vast majority of individuals experiencing an identity crisis do not resort to terrorism.

Further systematic and comparative research is required to validate these insights across diverse settings and over time, ensuring that our understanding of radicalization remains relevant and accurately reflects the complex interplay of factors at work. This will ultimately enhance the effectiveness of targeted interventions designed to prevent radicalization.

In essence, this paper suggests that tackling the issue of radicalization in the West requires a comprehensive understanding of the psychological, social, and cultural factors that contribute to identity crises. By addressing these underlying issues, it is possible to mitigate the appeal of extremist ideologies and reduce the likelihood of individuals turning to radical violence as a means of expressing their frustrations and reclaiming their identities.



Foreign fighters who flocked to Syria during that country's civil war belonged to a multitude of ethnicities and nationalities, including from Russia's Caucasus region.



We are a research center dedicated to combating terrorism and religious extremism. At Sawab Center, we believe in tackling extremism through a multi-faceted approach, by studying the underlying drivers and developing research-based strategies to counter it.

Our work focuses on a wide range of issues, from transnational terrorist groups to the spread of extremist thought. Our research lens includes the impact of socio-economic factors on extremism, and the psychological and cognitive factors that drive an individual towards radicalization.

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