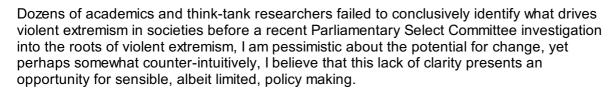# The cocktail of factors which promote violent radicalization presents an opportunity to build sensible policy-making.

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There is no particular combination of easily identifiable factors like social standing, family history, or poverty that leads individuals to violent radicalization. **Jamie Bartlett** *argues that policymakers would be wise to respect the blurring of factors that lead to radicalization and implement measures that encourage tolerance among our population.*

Dozens of academics and think-tank researchers failed to conclusively identify what drives violent extremism in societies before a recent Parliamentary Select Committee investigation into the roots of violent extremism, I am pessimistic about the potential for change, yet perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, I believe that this lack of clarity presents an opportunity for sensible, albeit limited, policy making.

There are a number of reasons why trying to identify the causes of violent extremism is so difficult. The first is an obvious lack of data. Just over one hundred convicted Islamist terrorists in the UK over the last decade or so, often with little in common, does not give researchers much to work with. However, we do know *some* things: a sense of grievance, a motivating ideology, an inspirational preacher and a facilitating network are common factors in encouraging extremism. Yet this is so abstract that it can probably describe how an individual decides to join the Green party or take part in a Topshop boycott. There are numerous confounding factors that social scientists can't account for, such as how one was brought up, the local housing situation, the friends one hangs around with and so on.

Indeed, to truly answer the question scientifically, we would compare our convicted terrorists against a data set of people with similar background demographics but who did not commit an act of terrorism. For several reasons this is impossibly difficult. Demos tried to do so but our report is far from perfect. A large number of people face very similar experiences and circumstances yet only a tiny minority turn to extremism. It is quite possible that an individual's personality might make a difference, for the same reason that I work for a think-tank and my brother is a boxing instructor. Trying to measure and predict this mystery would be a fools' errand.

To make matters more complex, violent extremism is a shape-shifter, always mutating. Specific forms of extremist ideology are quite probably generational. For some young people, al-Qaeda circa 2003 represented anti-establishment cool, with freedom fighters pitted against a bankrupt and superficial West. But al-Qaeda is not necessarily today's 16-24 year old's movement, and young people have a proclivity to find their own untrodden paths. The problem with evaluating particular periods of extremism is that we use the past to forecast the future. The understandable focus on al-Qaeda may have led to some security agencies taking their eyes off the neo-Nazi far-right, which is now growing. Anders Breivik provoked a frenetic correction. But who knows? The far-left could be the major terror threat of the next decade, as it was in the last period of extreme economic retraction. Certainly the language and rhetoric of some radical anarcho-Marxist groups is starting to resemble the revolutionary fervour of the Angry Brigade or the Red Army Faction.

All this leads to a conclusion which is more optimistic. Radicalisation is influenced by many factors: structural, societal, familial and personal. Not all of these factors are amenable to government intervention. Faced with such uncertainty, simplicity is often the best response. Thus, my evidence to the select committee concluded that the most effective response to countering violent extremism still remains hard-edge intelligence work: monitoring, intelligence gathering, disruption, and pre-emptive arrests. Prevention is always better than cure; unless, of course the disease is unidentified or misdiagnosed. It is far better then, to create social policy on the basis of making young people more resilient and tolerant. One example is to teach more critical thinking skills in schools (especially when considering internet content) as we've argued in our recent paper, *Truth, Lies and the Internet*. Another is to ensure newly arrived migrants gain sufficient English language skills to help them integrate into the wider community. A combination of these measures is likely to help reduce the likelihood of people getting drawn into extremist ideology.

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About the author

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Jamie Bartlett is Head of the Violence and Extremism Programme at Demos, which looks at a range of anti-social behaviour (gang culture, knife crime, violent extremism) and researches the norms, attitudes, and incentives by which they operate. The programme outputs are all based on generating new primary research in this area, often by interviewing and spending time with people in these groups. Jamie's primary research interests lie in terrorism, radicalisation and extremism, conspiracy theories and integration policy.