JOINING AL-QAEDA
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INTRODUCTION

In late November 2006, Eliza Manningham-Buller, the director general of the British Security Service – more commonly known as MI5 – gave a public speech in which she warned of the continuing threat from 'home-grown' terrorism. She said that her service knew of 1,600 individuals in the United Kingdom who were part of Islamist militant structures.[1] Almost exactly one year later, Manningham-Buller's successor, Jonathan Evans, updated the figures, announcing that the number had risen to 2,000, with perhaps another 2,000 whose identities were unknown to MI5.[2] What neither of the two directors general told their audience was how these structures had arisen and how they had come to be populated with such significant numbers of people.

The question of how individuals move from political extremism to being actively engaged in violent and/or terrorist groups is one of the least understood issues in the debate about terrorism and counter-terrorism. Hundreds of scholarly papers have attempted to explain people's drift into political extremism (that is, their radicalisation), but little is known about the ways in which – once radicalised – individuals become members of groups that support and/or engage in violence. There are dozens of theories concerning what causes radicalisation, but there is no fully developed theory of terrorist recruitment, nor has there been any attempt to develop a conceptual framework examining the issue more systematically.

In the absence of a coherent body of serious analytical work, crude ideas and muddled thinking continue to hold sway. Yet, if recruitment is to

be countered, it first needs to be understood. This paper aims to promote understanding of recruitment into the Islamist militant movement in Western Europe. It explores the nature of the process whereby individuals join the Islamist militant movement, and highlights relevant conditions, trends and developments that are believed to have a significant impact on the recruitment trajectory. Based on a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the phenomenon, it then suggests how a series of recommendations through which recruitment into violent extremism might be curbed. While some of the findings may be applicable to other places and extremist movements, many are unique to Western Europe, and this should be kept in mind. In fact, as will be shown in Chapter 1, even within Western Europe, the conditions that facilitate recruitment differ substantially from country to country. The paper is based – to a large extent – on the author's final report for a research project funded by the European Commission (EC).[3] A substantial part of the field work was carried out by a team of collaborators – especially Luiz Martinez at Sciences Po in Paris, Rogelio Alonso at the University King Juan Carlos in Madrid, and Brooke Rogers at King's College London – whose contributions will be acknowledged where appropriate. Needless to say, the analysis and the conclusions that are contained in this paper reflect the author's views, not those of the European Commission or any of the collaborators who participated in the research.

Chapter 1 outlines some of the underlying conditions, structures and dynamics for radicalisation and recruitment in Western Europe. In Chapter 2, the paper examines whether particular places – often referred to as 'recruitment grounds' – are significant in terrorist recruitment. Chapter 3 concentrates on the 'recruiters'. In Chapter 4, the paper looks at the messages used at the various stages of recruitment. Chapter 5 focuses on the Internet as a new environment in which radicalisation and recruitment take place. The conclusion sets out some recommendations which follow from the analysis provided in the main part of the paper and may help policymakers in thinking about possible counter-strategies.

Concepts and terminology

What is recruitment, and how does it relate to radicalisation? Although the two terms denote distinct phenomena, they are often used in conjunction and little effort is made to distinguish between them. Radicalisation is about the change in attitude that may lead individuals to embrace extra-constitutional methods of bringing about political change, including – ultimately – the use of violence.[4] Recruitment, on the other hand, describes

the process of joining a violent group. Conceptually, therefore, one may think of recruitment as being the link between radicalisation and the active pursuit of violence. In the words of the Danish researcher Michael Taarnby, it represents 'the bridge between personal belief and violent activism'.[5]

In practice, of course, it is neither useful nor feasible to view the two concepts separately. Many elements of the recruitment process cannot be understood without reflecting on individuals' pathways into radicalisation. Hence, whilst keeping in mind that radicalisation and recruitment can be thought of as entirely separate, it will be necessary to adopt a second, broader frame that contextualises the 'process of joining a violent group'. Recruitment – alongside 'grievance' and 'ideology' – constitutes one of the three elements around which most of the existing models of radicalisation revolve.[6] Without grievances – real or perceived – radical ideologies will not resonate. Without ideology, grievances may lead to crime and other forms of disorder and delinquency but are unlikely to result in politically motivated violence. And without recruitment, it will be impossible to channel individuals' sense of political frustration into collective action.[7] Indeed, it is the interplay between mobilisation, grievances and ideology that is critical to understanding how processes of recruitment unfold.

How, then, should recruitment be defined? In the popular understanding, the process of recruitment is a 'top-down' activity led by an organisation that seeks to attract new members. Even some of the more recent studies of terrorist recruitment reflect this interpretation. In a 2002 report, for example, the Dutch domestic intelligence service defined recruitment as the process whereby individuals are 'spotted … monitored … and manipulated … with the final purpose of having these people participate in the jihad'.[8] However, many analysts of contemporary jihadist recruitment believe that 'top-down' recruitment represents just one side of the coin. The American psychologist Marc Sageman, for instance, has argued that joining the Islamist militant movement is 'more of a bottom-up than a top-down activity' in which individuals are actively seeking out opportunities rather than being 'tricked', 'manipulated' or 'brainwashed' into becoming members.[9] For Sageman, al-Qaeda is akin to a elite university, which – rather than having to advertise – can sit back, wait for applicants to knock on its doors, and then pick the ones who are most suitable.[10] Whether Islamist militant recruitment in Europe is top-down or bottom-up is one of the questions this paper hopes to investigate. It will be important, therefore, to keep an open mind and define recruitment in the broadest possible terms, that is, as *the process through which individuals join entities engaged in violent extremism*.

Another term used throughout this paper is 'extremism'. The term can be used to refer to the *political ideologies* that are opposed to a society's core values and principles, which – in the context of European liberal democracies – could be said of any ideology that advocates racial or religious supremacy and/or opposes the core principles of democracy and human dignity.[11] The expression can also be used to describe the *methods* through which political actors attempt to realise their aims, that is, by using means that 'show disregard for the life, liberty, and human rights of others'.[12] In the absence of a consensus, it makes sense to qualify the concept – where necessary – by adding the appropriate adjective, that is, 'violent extremism' or 'ideological extremism'.

The type of violence which this paper is mostly concerned with is terrorism. Terrorism, of course, may well be the most contested word in the contemporary political vocabulary.[13] There is no agreed definition of terrorism in international law, nor is there any agreement amongst scholars. In the late 1980s, two researchers, Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman, conducted an extensive survey amongst leading academics in the field, concluding that its 'violent' nature was the only characteristic of terrorism which nearly everyone could agree upon.[14] In order to avoid the seemingly never-ending debate about the definition of terrorism, this paper follows the proposal put forward by the United Nations' High-Level Panel on Threat, Challenges and Changes, which – in its 2004 report – defined terrorism as '*any action… that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants*, when the purpose of such an act … is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act' (emphasis added).[15] This definition is by no means perfect, but – for the purposes of this paper, which focuses not primarily on the violent manifestations of terrorism but rather the structures that are used to facilitate it – it seems acceptable.

Finally, what is meant by 'Islamist militancy'? Any observer of the debate about terrorism and counter-terrorism in the post-11 September 2001 era will know that it is nearly impossible to describe the movement that has been responsible for the terrorist attacks in Washington and New York as well as those in Madrid and London with accuracy and without causing offence by joining together Islam and terrorism and/or militancy.[16] Much of the relevant literature suggests that what all the perpetrators involved in these attacks share is a strict, literalist practice of Sunni Islam (frequently referred to as Wahhabism or Salafism),[17] a political agenda (Islamism) that – in its widest-ranging expression – proclaims that a worldwide community of believers (the *umma*) should be united or liberated under