

Families and countering

Families Against Terrorism and Extremism (FATE) held its inaugural summit in Paris this May. **Emily Hough** reports on how more emphasis should be placed upon families in counter-radicalisation policies

These parents are up against one of the most sophisticated, brutal organisations in history,” said Daniel Kohler, Founder of the German Institute on Radicalisation and Deradicalisation Studies (GIRDS), referring to the families of young people who have gone abroad to fight with violent extremist groups such as so-called Islamic State.

“As families, we are on the frontline in the struggle against violent extremism and terrorism,” according to FATE, a grassroots network of organisations, families and individuals. “We are the first hit with pain, shame and guilt as our loved ones move towards extremist organisations or are targeted by terrorist attacks. It is time to fight back with resilience.”

The summit brought together families of young people killed fighting for violent extremist groups, as well as people who lost children to – or who were themselves victims of – terrorist attacks, extremism experts, researchers, along with specialists in countering violent extremism. The aim was to explore the positive role that families can play in this context, to provide support to families, enhance co-operation between families and authorities, to raise awareness among young people and the public about the spread of violent extremism and the recruitment techniques used, to educate about the signs of radicalisation and to give families the tools they need to keep young people safe.

Understanding radicalisation

A report prepared by Nikita Malik and Jonathan Russell of the counter extremism think tank the Quilliam Foundation, which manages FATE, was released at the event. It says: “Remarkably little attention has been paid to the part of families in the process of radicalisation. Yet one only has to look at the news to see the recent events of brothers, couples and mothers justifying, encouraging and supporting the martyrdom of close relatives for the causes of jihad.” Conversely, it points out that other families often have little or no understanding of radicalisation taking place within their homes, often “under their noses”.

The methods used by violent extremist groups are extremely sophisticated; they have highly developed psychological and propaganda skills and are adept at harnessing technology and social media to identify and recruit young people to their cause. They tap



Family ties can promote or deter extremism; in either circumstance, the influence and power of families are vital and should not be ignored

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into feelings of not belonging, of lack of companionship, isolation and dissatisfaction, instilling and nurturing grievances, sensitivity to discrimination and anger against the West. These feelings breed anger, and the groups provide an ideological cause to fight for.

The effect is one of self-segregation making targeted individuals seek companionship among like-minded individuals. These groups replace families, creating a sense of community and providing a sense of collective identity. Kinship terminology such as ‘brother’, ‘sister’ and ‘Ummah’ help to create a new ‘family’.

Some extremist groups actively incentivise people to join their organisations with the approval of their parents, using families as a part of the martyrdom process.

Those who are targeted for radicalisation are often vulnerable in some way; they may have suffered deep personal traumatic experiences. They are often at a point in their lives when they are trying to ascertain their place in the world, seeking political engagement, feeling isolated from society or experiencing a “dissonance in religious formation,” that leads them to search for answers beyond the religious leadership of older generations. Prisons are another, unsurprising, fertile ground for radicalisation.

Grooming radicalisers often make enticing promises. These might not just focus on motivating vulnerable people to join fighting forces, but could play upon feelings of wanting

violent extremism

to help alleviate suffering. As one participant put it: “They are promised a purpose, travel, romance, state building, a cause, an amazing afterlife... What state can offer that?”

“The reality is that no state can, but once they are inside, they cannot escape, especially women.”

At first, finding religion often appears to be a positive step. This was reinforced by the compelling testimonies of people whose children or siblings were killed fighting for violent extremist groups in Syria and elsewhere.

Michael Evans lost his older brother Thomas after he converted to Islam and was subsequently killed fighting for Al-Shabaab in Kenya in 2015. Michael traced the process, saying his brother had been troubled and involved in petty crime before turning to Islam: “I was happy to have my brother back,” he said.

Gradually, Thomas began to question everything his family was doing, detaching himself: “He had a go at me for eating bacon. He wouldn’t come out of his room at Christmas.” Michael and his mother tried to challenge his views, but to no avail. They reached out to various authorities – including the local mosque – but support and information were sadly lacking.

This feeling of helplessness of watching a loved one succumb to radicalisation was echoed by Christianne Boudreau, whose son Damian Clairmont had suffered from depression and nearly succeeded in a suicide attempt. “He found Islam and it was good. My son was back, the person I loved had returned.”

Again, over time, Damian’s behaviour changed; he started to avoid places where women were ‘improperly dressed’ and became rigid in his behaviour and observation of strict Islamic practices. He joined so-called Islamic State and died in Syria in 2014.

Karolina Damm of Denmark had a similar tale. Her son Lukas, who had Asperger’s, travelled to Syria in 2014, ending up joining ISIS and is thought to have died in December 2014 after an airstrike conducted by the US-led coalition. Initially, when Lukas found religion, this was a positive thing: “He found his peace and quiet, a place of being.”

Dominique Bons’ son was killed in Syria in 2013. He converted to Islam in 2010 and, she said: “It started well.” But when she noticed changes in his behaviour, she felt isolated, not knowing where to turn. Dominique emphasised that families need more support and to know where they can turn to for advice, a common theme throughout the summit.

Saliha Ben Ali founded Society Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) in Belgium after her son Sbrî was killed in Syria in 2013. She warned: “They are recruiting children without distinction of nationality or religion. They want cannon fodder to achieve their strategic aims.”

Saliha raised an important point in that not all of those who travelled to Syria: “Went to commit barbaric acts. Some go from noble motivations, they wanted to help the Syrian people.” Again, when they arrive, they become enmeshed with the violence and it is virtually impossible to extricate themselves.

As mentioned earlier, violent extremist groups are accomplished in the use of social media and the Internet to identify, isolate, motivate and recruit. Lorin Lafave, whose 14-year-old son Breck was groomed by an online predator, provided a distressing account of how families

can be aware of what is going on and attempt to intervene, without success. A “controlling and manipulative individual” groomed Breck through online gaming. He isolated Breck from his family, lured him from his home and murdered him in a sexually sadistic manner.

Lorin’s presentation was a sobering reflection on cybercrime and protecting children online. She and her family actively sought to prevent the predator from communicating with Breck, even speaking to the police. Yet their concerns and evidence were not followed up. “What if this had been an instance of terrorism?” she asked, calling for: “More programmes – parents need to be empowered and educated to make the right decisions.”

So, what can be done? Alternative narratives are vital and considered by far the most effective and cost effective branch of counter-extremism, these include presenting counter-narratives in a wider sense, online and through education.

However, soft measures, such as education, must not take an inappropriate or overly securitised approach to counter-terrorism as this could feed the sense of grievance and add fuel to the narratives of the extremist groomers.

Families are, indeed, best placed to provide the sense of belonging that extremist groups seek to replace. As such, it is essential that they are recognised as a key factor: “Both in deterring people from extremism and fomenting it.”

It is family members who are most likely to recognise the signs of radicalisation. They should be given support, information, training and advice – without being alienated or feeling judged – to help focus on the victim narrative, to counter

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dehumanising language, and thereby present a positive view of Islam that counters the extremist Islamist world view.

Families can discuss integration, promote solidarity against extremism and terrorism, they can talk about shared identity and shared values. They can promote critical thinking skills and build resilience to grievances by talking about them. They should make loved ones aware of the exploitative nature of extremist groups and the dangers of committing to violent extremism. And, most importantly, parents must be digitally literate.

But they must be helped with this challenge, through networks, training, support and, most importantly, they must be informed where to find these services at a time when they are likely to be confused, worried and unsure of where to turn.

They cannot be expected to act alone.

Author

Emily Hough is Editor in Chief of the CRJ. This is a very brief summary of the summit and the report; readers wishing to learn more should visit www.findfate.org where they can find more details about participating organisations and individuals, research and strategies, along with videos of the presentations and discussions

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