

Violence-promoting Islamist extremism in Sweden – a summary

Scope and method

This government-commissioned report by the Swedish Security Service contains a description of violence-promoting Islamist extremism in Sweden, discernible radicalisation processes and tools and strategies for countering radicalisation. The report uses the term violence-promoting Islamist extremism to describe the type of security-threatening activities motivated by Islamist arguments and which ultimately aim to use violence or threats of violence to push society in an undemocratic direction. The Swedish Security Service defines radicalisation as the process leading to an individual or a group supporting or engaging in ideologically motivated violence as a method of promoting their cause.

Empirical descriptions of violence-promoting Islamist extremism and radicalisation processes presented in the report are mainly a result of systematic processing and analysis of existing Security Service material. In order to balance the need for an up-to-date picture with operational considerations (e.g. respecting the secrecy applying to ongoing investigations), focus has been placed on data from 2009. The report also includes information from publicly available sources, such as public agency reports and academic papers.

The Swedish Security Service has also worked along two parallel lines with people whose experiences and knowledge are deemed relevant to the report. To obtain a stakeholder perspective, we have met with representatives of Muslim interests as well as with individual practising Muslims. We have also discussed the issue from a professional perspective with scholars, the community police and others engaged in crime prevention or involved in helping people leave violence-promoting groups. The views put forward have made a valuable contribution to the report, especially in terms of tools and strategies for use in countering radicalisation. The proposals presented from a stakeholder as well as a professional perspective are also in line with the empirical evidence presented by the Security Service. The external perspectives thereby strengthen the conclusions of the report.

Violence-promoting Islamist extremism

A number of networks based on a violence-promoting Islamist extremist ideology are active in Sweden. Most of them focus on action and propaganda against foreign troops in Muslim countries and against governments they see as corrupt and not representing what the networks consider to be the only true interpretation of Islam. Individuals active in these networks engage in activities aiming to support and facilitate terrorist offences in other countries. They do so in various ways, such as spreading a violence-promoting message, recruiting more active supporters, through financial or practical support, joining and training with armed Islamist extremist groups or planning and carrying out attacks. The areas currently of interest to such individuals in Sweden are Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan/Pakistan and North Africa.

Specialisation on an individual level as well as on network level may lead to the emergence of particular functions, such as recruiters, intermediaries, web administrators or fundraisers. These functions however are neither static nor strictly defined, and most active members carry out several tasks. Individuals returning to Sweden with experiences from training and/or using violence in other countries also play a prominent role in the networks. Whether aware of it or not, such returnees are seen as role models who inspire others keen to attend

training camps or otherwise support violence-promoting Islamist extremism, and therefore often contribute to increased support activities in Sweden. Increased knowledge and larger international contact networks give returnees a special status, resulting in some of them having set up their own networks after returning to Sweden.

The group of active members on whose actions the descriptions in this report are based consists of just under 200 individuals. According to Security Service information, these individuals participated in or supported violence-promoting Islamist extremism in 2009 or later, when they were registered as domiciled in Sweden. Most of these individuals are male, although ages and backgrounds vary. Several women affiliated with violence-promoting Islamist circles are also assessed to share the violence-promoting ideology, but in most cases do not engage in activities directly linked with security-threatening activities.

There are confirmed connections between at least 80 per cent of the members of the group, mainly in the form of friendship relations. This illustrates the significance of social connections, especially in the context of how people are drawn into these circles. The fact that these people are connected does not, however, make them one coherent network capable of fully coordinating its resources and working towards the same goal.

As a majority of active members are registered as domiciled in Sweden's three major cities, violence-promoting Islamist extremism could be described as an urban problem. However, where a person is domiciled does not necessarily show where they actually live or carry out their activities. One characteristic of violence-promoting Islamist extremism is that activities may take place in several different environments. These may be physical as well as virtual locations, open as well as closed environments, and informal as well as formal groups. It follows from this that there is no clear connection between this type of security-threatening activity and specific geographical locations.

Over the past few years, internet forums have become increasingly important to violence-promoting Islamist extremism. These forums function as media organs, information channels and platforms for spreading messages and making contact. Information technology is widely used to convince and to recruit others into a violence-promoting ideology, as well as for anonymous and secure communication with those already involved. People in Sweden can access and come into contact with violence-promoting messages and influential ideologues without a physical context. By providing a simple and low-cost alternative, the internet has also enabled sophisticated and extensive propaganda campaigns aimed at particular target groups.

By and large it is easier to characterise the most frequently occurring contexts as social rather than physical. The places involved are often those where many young people gather, whether in actual meeting rooms or in chatrooms. Violence-promoting Islamist extremism is also more frequent in contexts marked by alienation and difficult social circumstances.

Radicalisation processes

The individuals on whose activities this report is based have all been through a radicalisation process. However, there is no given answer as to how and why radicalisation happens. Most scholars, though, agree that this is a social process and that it is possible to identify substantial similarities in radicalisation processes in various ideological contexts. There are similarities in both the push and pull factors that may increase the likelihood that

a person becomes radicalised. The reason why radicalisation processes may display similarities in spite of differing ideological contexts is that the main causes are often social and emotional rather than ideological.

Radicalisation in violence-promoting Islamist contexts does occur in Sweden, albeit to a limited extent. It takes place mostly among individuals and groups, and is not a problem on a societal level. There is nothing in the Security Service's material to indicate that radicalisation is on the increase. The majority of people radicalised in Sweden are males in the age group 15 to 30. Most of them were born or grew up in Sweden, and it is here that they come into contact with violence-promoting ideologies and groups.

Radicalisation often takes place among groups of friends that are characterised by a yearning for excitement and a fascination with violence. They often lack contact with established violence-promoting networks and are primarily inspired by global violence-promoting Islamist rhetoric. Group dynamics is important, and intense socialising and watching violence propaganda is common.

Others are instead radicalised through contacts with people or groups that already promote violence. They may have contacted these people themselves, or they may have been contacted in contexts otherwise lacking any connection to violence-promoting messages.

It also happens that individuals linked to established violence-promoting circles use youth groups or small associations as arenas for radicalisation. This could happen in connection with conferences or meetings where violence-promoting messages are spread, in closed environments, to those deemed susceptible.

A small number of people self-radicalise, mainly through the internet. These people often lack previous contact with established violence-promoting networks and groups, but are in some cases lured into such groups. This means that also self-radicalisation requires social interaction, albeit online and not face to face. The fascination with violence and the yearning for excitement is a common characteristic for these people, just as for those radicalised in a group of friends.

The threat from violence-promoting Islamist extremism

The threat from violence-promoting Islamist extremism in Sweden is currently not a threat to the fundamental structures of society, Sweden's democratic system or Central Government. A relatively limited number of people are involved in violence-promoting Islamist extremism, and there is nothing to indicate that the number of people radicalised in Sweden is on the increase. In other words, while violence-promoting Islamist extremist groups do not pose a threat to Swedish society they are still a threat to individuals and groups, especially in other countries.

People are known to travel from Sweden with the intent of joining violence-promoting Islamist extremist groups abroad to take part in training and, in some cases, unlawful acts of violence organised by such groups. This makes these persons a concrete security threat in the countries concerned, regardless of whether they themselves engage in unlawful acts of violence or enable others to do so. Such actions also risk damaging Sweden's international reputation. Sweden is bound by international law to ensure that Swedish nationals or others residing here do not pose a threat to other countries, and that Sweden does not become a base for terrorism.

Since the London bombings in 2005, no Islamist-motivated terrorist attacks have been carried out anywhere in the European Union. However, a number of planned or attempted attacks, most of them in the UK, Denmark and Germany, have been detected and averted. Together with an increasing number of explicit threats against Europe expressed in al-Qaida's rhetoric and propaganda, these attempted attacks show an increased focus on Europe as the target of attacks linked to violence-promoting Islamist extremist networks. The level of threat, however, varies considerably between EU countries, a handful of which are assessed as facing a higher level of threat than others.

Causes and drivers

A number of factors assessed to potentially fuel radicalisation or otherwise affect the threat from violence-promoting Islamist extremism are likely to remain relevant for the next few years.

The most serious potential threat to Sweden is the long-term effects of people from Sweden choosing to travel abroad to join violence-promoting Islamist extremist groups. In our assessment, this type of travel has seen an increase lately and there are currently no signs of falling interest in joining foreign groups. Not only does time spent with such groups increase participants' capability, it also risks having an effect on their intent. Several foreign groups who used to have a local or regional agenda have increasingly come to use arguments based on global violence-promoting Islamist ideologies, thereby making more arenas and targets appear legitimate to them. A situation involving a higher number of returnees from foreign violence-promoting Islamist extremist groups is assessed to have a potentially negative effect on the threat to Sweden.

The interaction between local and global factors has also come to play an ever-increasing role in radicalisation and violence-promoting Islamist extremism in Sweden as well as internationally. The Danish Mohammed cartoons and the publication in Sweden of drawings of the Prophet Muhammed as a dog are examples of local events that may fuel radicalisation globally. Since the first publication in the autumn of 2007, several cases of controversial depictions of the Prophet have been noted in Sweden. Protests have targeted not only the people seen as responsible for the various images but also Sweden as a country. In some cases, protesters make no difference between the various targets of their criticism. This may have an impact on Swedish as well as foreign players and their intent to act in various ways against the country or the people perceived as insulting or supporting insults of Islam.

On the whole, increased polarisation in society may also reinforce the feeling of discrimination and stigmatisation among disenfranchised groups. This may be one factor facilitating radicalisation and recruitment of individuals into violence-promoting groups.

Tools and strategies

The main conclusions of the report are that violence-promoting Islamist extremism and radicalisation do exist in Sweden and should not be underestimated as potential threats. The currently limited occurrences should be countered mainly by an increased focus on preventive measures. This may be coupled with measures to facilitate for people to leave violence-promoting Islamist groups (de-radicalisation). Any such measures should however be initiated and carried out by civil society players. Given the substantial similarities in how and why people

radicalise, regardless of ideological affiliation, it should be possible to better coordinate preventive efforts and countermeasures targeting various extremist groups. Experiences and knowledge gained from crime prevention initiatives in general should also play a more prominent role. Not only should public agencies on all levels – national, regional and local – engage in the preventive work, so also should civil society players and, in a larger perspective, all citizens.

One important part of this work is the promotion of constructive options for people who would otherwise risk being radicalised or finding themselves in some other destructive context. The fact that radicalisation into violence-promoting Islamist extremism is reinforced by segregation and perceived exclusion is evident from the Security Service's own material and has also been pointed out by representatives from both the stakeholder and professional groups consulted for this report. Initiatives aiming to improve people's situation in terms of employment, housing and education therefore serve as examples of efforts that may yield positive results in a number of areas, such as reducing the risk of radicalisation. Also, strategies to improve people's lives in general are less likely to fuel radicalisation as they do not stigmatise any particular group.

The report also shows that for most people who are radicalised, this process was initiated at a fairly young age. Preventive measures should therefore primarily target young people, who are also the ones described as being most susceptible to radicalisation attempts. Unlike in other violence-promoting extremist groups, people active in violence-promoting Islamist networks remain active as they grow older. In other words, this commitment is not a typical teenage fad that active members will grow out of, which again highlights the importance of measures aiming to prevent people from becoming radicalised. As countermeasures are always more effective the earlier they are taken, close interaction between schools, social services and the community police, enabling them to exchange information and draw on each other's knowledge, is a critical success factor for effective preventive efforts at the local level.

Civil society players also have an important role in this. It is evident both from the Security Service's material and from external contacts that individuals and organisations in the Swedish Muslim community in particular have an opportunity to contribute to preventing and countering radicalisation. It has, for instance, been pointed out on several occasions that a deeper knowledge of Islam may reduce the risk of radicalisation or contribute to de-radicalisation; a finding which is also consistent with Security Service data. Practising Muslims may thus, in their capacity as religious authorities, counterbalance violence-promoting propagandists active in Sweden and abroad. This, however, does not mean that Swedish Muslims as a group have a greater responsibility than other Swedes to prevent and counter radicalisation in violence-promoting Islamist groups. All organisations working with young people need encouragement and help to challenge those representing and advocating undemocratic and violence-promoting ideologies.

At the end of the day, preventing and countering radicalisation is everyone's responsibility, as citizens and members of society.