



Illustration: Lisa Ryszkowska

Living in fear

Why do some young British Muslims feel driven to radicalism in Britain? Tina Orr Munro reports on the views of a former extremist and how the police are trying to tackle the issue

When Shariz Mahir went to Leeds University, he was not even a practising Muslim. By the time he left he belonged to a radical Islamic group involved in a series of coup attempts overseas.

He says the UK is a fertile recruiting ground for extremists who have long shaken off the 'mad mullah' image presented by the media and are adopting increasingly subtle methods of radicalising young male British Muslims.

"The man I met at University had a first class degree in Arabic and Politics who knew the Qu'ran by heart. He was calm and rational in the way he presented what were pretty distasteful ideas. We had an open dialogue which was about redemption and salvation and not fire and brimstone which is preached by mosque leaders," he told a Policy Spotlight Conference: Engaging with Young Muslim Men at Risk of Disaffection and Extremism.

Mr Mahir, now an investigative journalist, only left the organisation by moving to a different part of the country. He says extremist groups are not only recruiting young Muslims but are infiltrating Muslim communities in Britain in an effort to gain a 'tacit mandate' for their extremist ideas.

Senior police officers admit that tackling these groups and trying to prevent young Muslim men being recruited by them is one of the biggest challenges for the police and the community.

Tarique Ghaffur, assistant commissioner with the Met and Britain's highest ranking Asian officer, says British Muslims feel more resentful at how they are treated here than their counterparts in France and Spain.

"They feel they can't be British and Muslim. They are living in fear, denial and self-reflection. There is a growing discontent, a sense of helplessness about the situation here and globally," he says.

He admits the weakest part of the Met's anti-terrorist strategy is the 'prevention' strand and the police are able to only provide part of the solution. Mr Ghaffur said: "A blanket policy of eradication doesn't work. We still need a robust law enforcement agenda. The threat of terrorism is very real but we cannot rely solely on law enforcement. We need a stronger prevention agenda."

They achieve this by deliberately pushing themselves to the forefront of communities and winning them over by becoming involved in worthy schemes such as anti-drug initiatives. In Stoke-on-Trent one group helped local people get a porn shop closed down. They are also organised and during one campaign were able to

distribute a million stickers. Now they are even turning to rap music to reach young people. One song likens the situation in Palestine to parts of London.

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“The likes of Abu Hamza came here as angry radicals. The ideas have not changed, but these people are now born and bred here and they are more adept at what they can and cannot say,” says Mr Mahir.

Mr Ghaffur said that a huge amount of work has been done since 7/7, but that they need new ideas to tackle the issue. He says that the police must push the community safety agenda while the community must also play its part.

He said: “There doesn’t appear to be any single answer in terms of the way forward. We are in this for the long term. When you work to increase community safety for all, everyone signs up to that safety agenda.

“We need to help the community engage in self-policing with greater community supervision at home and in the wider community and we need to ensure it’s extended to study groups. We are urging the Pakistani government to supervise young British Muslims travelling alone in Pakistan.

“We need to connect and the community leadership needs to come up with a creative solution.”

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Ted Cantle, associate director of the Improvement and Development Agency for local government and author of the Cantle report commissioned by former Home Secretary David Blunkett, in the aftermath of the race riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, agrees that the answer lies within the community, but not necessarily with its leaders. Agencies including the police need to be clear that the community leaders are the right people to be dealing with.

“The skill for those wanting to engage with the community is to understand the community leaders. They are either gatekeepers or gateways to the community. Some want to direct everything through them and control the whole process and if you don’t go through them they will frustrate your attempts to reach the community. Make sure you are only interested in gateways.”

Mr Cantle believes that women’s groups could be a better avenue to reaching young Muslims because they are ‘far more willing to develop

new dialogue, new ideas and breakdown the hierarchical structure’.

He says that communities are not as hard to reach as people think and it really is as simple as going out and meeting people and establishing long term relationships.

“That’s still not happening to any significant degree. We meet people and they say you are the first that have come to speak to us.

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“We haven’t found it a problem to reach people. If you are determined to find them in their community, I don’t think it’s that difficult to engage with them.”

He also warns that one-off exercises are ‘never going to work’.

“They should be drawn into the local processes that are sustainable. The more special initiatives you have, the more self-defeating it becomes,” he adds.

There is a long way to go before an effective approach that successfully diverts young Muslim men away from radical groups is fully developed.

But for Shariz Mahir, a starting point would be to ban all extremist groups in this country.

“The UK is the home of these groups. Extremists are just as likely to originate from a Leeds mosque as from a madras in Lahore. They are using our freedoms.

These are active revolutionary groups that present a clear and present danger.”

