



Europe's Extremists: An Interview with Nafees Hamid

One year on from the terror attacks in Barcelona, Nafees Hamid discusses his research on jihadism in Spain and far-right nationalism in Europe, and how neuroscience can aid counter-extremism efforts.

Q. You spent more than three years researching European jihadis, and you were in Barcelona during the August 2017 attacks. What did your research involve and why did you decide to conduct fieldwork in Barcelona?

My research focused on ethnographic fieldwork with the Pakistani and Moroccan populations in Barcelona. We collected psychometric survey data (values, identities, threat perception, radicalization, personality inventories, and many other measures) from 146 Pakistanis and 535 Moroccans (and at least 200 more pilot surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups from both populations). After selecting the most radical participants we brought them into a brain scanner to run neuroscience experiments on them. With my colleagues at the [Autonomous University of Barcelona](#) and [Artis International](#) we designed a series of studies that would elucidate aspects of radicalization. Barcelona is the area of Spain that has produced the largest number of radicalized individuals, and Spain as a country ranks among the top nations in Europe hit by jihadist-linked radicalization.

Q. From the fMRI scans you've conducted, what have you learned so far about the brains of jihadi sympathisers?

Our fMRI studies were not aimed at studying the "radicalized brain". People who we would call "radicalized" don't seem to be fundamentally different than the rest of the population. They span the normal distribution of personality traits and cognitive functioning. But they do adopt values that justify violence against civilians. So we wanted to compare their sacred vs non-sacred values and their

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personal willingness to fight and die for them. Sacred values are those that are non-negotiable and inviolable. We found that these values are processed in very different ways. One finding is that sacred values seem to bypass cognitive control areas and our participants were more willing to sacrifice their lives for them. Our findings indicate that practitioners who are interested in prevention, deradicalization, and reintegration of violent extremists should avoid sacred values and instead aim their persuasion efforts at non-sacred values (which vary from person to person).

Q. As mentioned, your work on extremism stresses the importance of “sacred values” and social networks. Why are networks so important to sacred values?

As stated above, sacred values are preferences that are non-negotiable and inviolable. In particular, they are non-fungible with profane values such as material rewards. In the case of the radicalization process, offline social networks are usually groups of very close friends and relatives who co-radicalize each other. Often the initial values of an extremist group will be seeded into the network by one of the members who was exposed to the idea by an acquaintance. Initially the value will not be sacred as it is a new idea. But as the network of friends spend more talking about it and sharing their feelings and insights on the matter the more the value will sacralize. As the value sacralizes, it also has a binding effect on the group which brings them closer together. By the end, the values become sacred and their group of friends become "fused". Now they are ready to make extreme sacrifices for cause and comrade.

Q. You've also conducted research on the resurgence of nationalism in Europe. Some have suggested that there are similar drivers to this growth to

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those behind the rise of jihadism. How much truth is there to this story? Are certain sacred values also at work here?

They have their similarities and differences. The most important similarity is the underlying problem of disaffection. Both jihadist and far-right sympathizers don't see themselves belonging to the current state of the groups they are associated with and so they want to reclaim them. The journey to join these movements sometimes starts with a personal sense of marginalization or it can stem from a sense of injustice being bestowed upon one's group. Disaffection will only exacerbate with globalization which renders unequal benefits unto different groups and which unmoors many from their heritage and puts them on the market place of new identities. An identity market place is one where anti-establishment groups wield particularly high allure, especially for those who are socially aggrieved. Extremist groups offer sacred values, strong identities and an action plan on how to regain their perceived loss of group dignity. There are many more groups who feel aggrieved in a similar manner, but they have not found a grand narrative that can graft these feelings onto a social movement. If we don't resolve these underlying conditions, then we're playing a waiting game for the next narrative to mobilize the new wave of the potentially violent, disaffected youth.

Q. How can neuroscience feed into counter-extremism work?

Neuroscience offers a window into the mind. In psychology or survey studies, participants often "posture", meaning they give the answer that they think is desirable. Brain activity can tell us if there are subtle shifts in thinking that may not be detectable using explicit measures. That's not to say that neuroscience tools are lie detectors - we're not at that level of sophistication yet. But sometimes we can detect shifts in valuation, a changing of identity, or an

uncertainty about commitment that the participants themselves may not even be fully aware of. This can be a powerful diagnostic tool for various counter-radicalization interventions.

Q. Counter-extremism has become a hotly discussed topic and there's much disagreement about what works and what doesn't. The UK's "Prevent" strategy is one example of an approach that has yielded much controversial debate. Do you think that certain countries have more effective approaches than others, and, if so, why?

It's hard to say if one country is better than another. Each has their positives and negatives. What's clear is that most countries don't want to get their hands dirty. They tend to create programmes that remain far away from the vulnerable population. They either create counter or alternative narratives and put them online or they create community-based programs but deliver them mostly to those who won't benefit from the programmes. Extremist groups not only offer a resonating grand narrative, but also immediate engagement. It's the action-orientation of these groups that's so appealing. Even if an alternative narrative reaches its intended audience and even if it resonates with them, unless it offers them something they can actually do, something they can get involved with, the effects will be largely useless. This is why effective programs should offer counter-engagement rather than narratives. Small local action-oriented groups that have aspirational goals will do more to positively rechannel the passion of the disaffected in their communities than online videos. Another failure of these programs is to deliver guidance to anyone who will listen, which usually consists of those who don't need much guidance. Instead, working directly with friends and families of those who are already suspected of radicalizing would be more useful. Most budding radicals have large networks

of non-radicals in their social circle and in most cases that extended network either isn't aware of the radicalization taking place or they don't know how to intervene. Equipping these individuals with the tools to effectively intervene would be more targeted than other blanket approaches.

Q. Now that the Islamic State has lost large amounts of territory, there has been discussion about how the jihadi threat will evolve, including in Europe. How do you see the character of jihadism in Europe changing?

It's still too early to tell. Perhaps ISIS will grow their base in Libya in which case it will be their gateway into Europe. Conversely, Al Qaida may continue to focus on various foreign battlefields where European recruits play less frontline roles. What's clear is that these are dynamic systems and as counter-terrorism tactics evolve so do the tactics of avoiding them which include changing profiles of recruits. But the greatest buffer against recruitment efforts is to engage vulnerable European youth with something that inspires them before violent extremists can get to them.

About the interviewee



Nafees Hamid is a Frederick Bonnart-Braunthal Trust scholar in the Terrorism and Organized Crime Unit in University College London's department of Security and Crime Science, and an associate fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague. His research focuses on the psychology of radicalization as well as the rise of right-wing nationalism in Europe. As a field researcher he

conducts ethnographic interviews, large-scale surveys, psychology field experiments, crime mapping, social network analysis and neuroimaging studies.

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