

# MANUAL RELIGIOUS LEADERS

## Radicalisation and how it's relevant to you

### A MANUAL FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS

*This manual includes information about signs that a young person may be radicalising, some tips about how you can make contact with them to discuss this sensitive issue, and how you might think about working together with other professionals like law enforcement and social services. It has been produced by TERRA, a European wide network-based learning program. This advice is part of a complete toolkit, created for local and national governments, and for front liners coming into professional contact with vulnerable individuals or groups who may be at risk of radicalising.*

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## 1 AIMS AND BACKGROUND: DEALING WITH RADICALISATION

Radicalisation is a topic of concern for a lot of religious leaders. As a religious leader, you may see young people drifting away from the community towards more radical groups, or encounter parents who are worried about their children. Maybe you have been invited by the local government or by law enforcement to cooperate, but it's hard to estimate what they want and what that would mean for your position and your community.

This manual aims to support you in dealing with this topic. It offers information about signs that a person may be radicalising, some tips about how to respond, how to use your community in building resilience, and how to support parents. It also reflects on the role you could play in a network approach, together with for example social services and law enforcement.

We have written this manual because religious radicalisation in Europe is a growing problem. The other manuals in the TERRA toolkit focus on other forms of radicalisation as well, but this one focusses especially on Islamist extremism. It has been written by a group of researchers, supported by an Imam and theologian.

We hope that, when you have read this manual, you might:

- Be more aware of the possibility that someone within your community is at risk of radicalising;
- Know what some of the causes of this process might be;
- Know what some of the possible signs of this process are;
- Feel empowered to address the signs appropriately in contacts with vulnerable individuals and their families;
- Have a clearer idea on how you and your religious community can promote resilience;
- Be aware of the other professional groups which could be involved in influencing this process towards a positive outcome, and providing support both for you and for the person you have concerns about.

Remember that the Qur'an warns against religious extremism: "**Do not go to extremes in your religion.**"<sup>1</sup> Fittingly, this warning is given twice, perhaps indicating the reality that there always two extremes either side of every Golden Mean.

Also, the Prophet (peace be upon him) repeatedly warned against the dangers of extremism and taught practical steps that would guarantee a balanced spiritual life in this world and guard against destructive extremism. One of the teachings of the Prophet in this regard is: "Beware of extremism in religion, for it destroyed those before you."<sup>2</sup>

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## 2 WHY YOU?

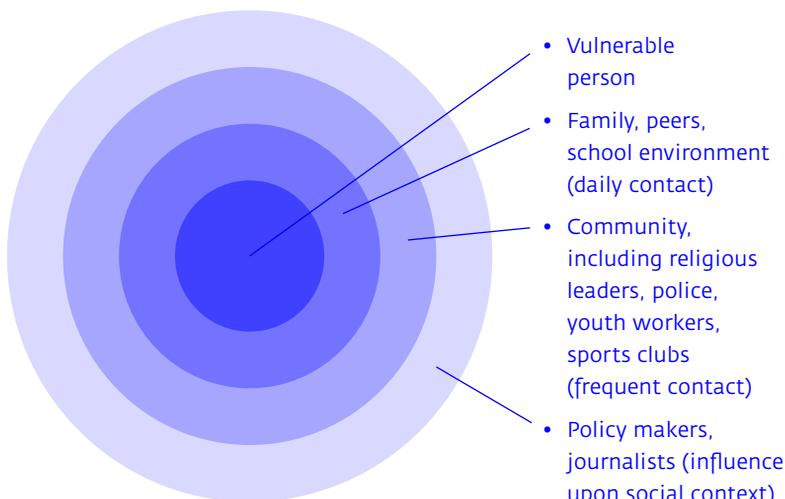
Radicalisation is, essentially, a process of change, connected to a quest for identity and meaning. As someone working regularly with people searching for meaning and guidance, your profession puts you in a position where you may be confronted with signals of possible radicalisation. You may see people from your community change their behaviour, appearance or interactions with you or with their peer group.

1 Qur'an, al-Nisa' (Women), 4:171 & al-Ma'idah (The Tablespread), 5:80

2 Ahmad (nos. 1851 & 3248), Nasa'i, Ibn Majah, Hakim & others - cf. Sahih al-Jami' al-Saghir of M.N. al-Albani, no. 2680 & Silsilah al-Ahadith al-Sahihah of M.N. al-Albani, no. 1283.

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Here is how we have visualised the context of a person who may be at risk of radicalising:



Every circle has its own type of contact with and influence on the vulnerable person involved. Changes in behaviour, peer group or ideology are more obvious to people in the innermost circle than the outermost. A young person's parents, for example, are able to see that their son has made drastic changes to his appearance, and has gradually gathered a new set of friends, leaving behind his old peer group. A police officer, who is seeing the boy for the first time will not be able to see how much he has changed within the last year – and this process is crucial. That's why it's so important to realise that in order to really grasp what might be going on, contact, communication and transparency between and within the respective circles is vital.

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### 3 WHAT COULD BE YOUR ROLE?

In your profession, you fall within the innermost or second ring, close to the person who may be at risk. You see young people in your community growing up and gradually forming ideas and beliefs about their position in society, and their own personal identity. You are aware of their family context and you see them selecting peer groups. You may be a person that they turn to if they have questions about meaning, or if they want to discuss certain aspects of religion. As the Prophet, peace be upon him, taught: "Every one of you is a shepherd, and every one is responsible for his or her flock."

In your role of teaching a community, you can stimulate resilience amongst youth, addressing the topics they struggle with, pointing to the nuances. Your teachings may also support parents in discussing ideology when their children develop radical ideas.

You don't stand alone on this: you can involve the whole religious community in offering a safe space for adolescents to develop their own identity. You're also not alone on this since we propose a network approach that promotes a multi-disciplinary sharing of questions and concerns on this topic.

In no way do you have to become an expert on terrorism – but you are already an expert on teaching and caring for the people within your community, and through that expertise you may be able to play a vital role. Besides, with your expertise you can also add a lot of value to the network of professionals, like

*Evil exists in the world and our test is to face it and turn it around into goodness.*

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social workers, teachers and police officers. Your knowledge of cultural and religious customs and beliefs may help them interpret issues they may have with a person in the right way, and chose an approach that is appropriate in the given situation.

*Help each other towards piety and righteousness.  
Do not help each other towards sin and enmity.*

[Qur'an 5:2]

It may be helpful though, to have a basic understanding of the mechanisms that play a role in radicalisation. That is what this manual provides, along with an indication of what may be worrying signs. It is very important to underline that there is no checklist of "symptoms" which, if all the boxes are ticked, definitively says that someone is radicalising. But there are some signs which might indicate that a radicalisation process is underway. A person who is radicalising goes through a psychological process, which may become evident in a change in attitude towards, for example, the government. Also, group influences are crucial for radicalisation processes. Therefore you have to be alert to recruitment, family ties, and groups drifting away from the mainstream.

A radicalisation process can go very fast, taking place in a matter of weeks, or be a gradual development spread over years, or anything in between. Some people may display all of characteristics described in the following chapters, others just a few of them. You may see indicators occur simultaneously or maybe only one or two can be relevant in a given situation. You don't need to see the whole picture on your own. Share your concerns.

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## 4 RISKS AND RESILIENCE

This chapter points out some background factors that may increase the risk someone may explore the path of radicalisation. We would like to emphasize that those background factors don't automatically direct someone in a dangerous direction. A quest for identity for example is quite normal at a certain age. It's nevertheless important to be aware of those factors. It will help you to take a more focused approach to building resilience and offering protective factors. It also stresses the importance of timely addressing those struggles in your sermons and in your contacts with youth.

**Individuals possibly vulnerable to the influence of radical groups may be:**

- Struggling with identity. Especially young people who deal with a dual identity (they are Muslims, but they also feel very much a part of the European society they belong to) need attention. They often feel excluded when their issues are not being addressed. Searching for an identity is very natural, as God says, "We made you nations and tribes that you may know each other ..." [Qur'an 49:13]
- Connected to someone within a radical group. If a sibling, parent or close friend is known to be a member of a radical group, the influence on the individual within your group will be much stronger. As the Prophet, peace be upon him, taught: "A person follows the way of his or her close friend, so be careful whom you befriend closely."
- Experiencing discrimination, real or perceived. If a young person feels treated differently due to the ethnic, religious or political group he belongs to, he or she is likely to feel resentful. If no legitimate solution is found, this person may eventually feel attracted to the solutions a radical group promises.

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USAMA HASAN  
FORMER RADICAL  
SENIOR RESEARCHER QUILLIAM FOUNDATION, UK

*The violence I'd been subjected to, the police discrimination, a greater awareness of foreign conflicts such as Bosnia, all this undoubtedly made me highly receptive to the Islamist message. I was desperately looking for answers.*

(M. Nawaz, Radical 2012:78)

## DO

- Invest in gaining trust. Trust in religious authority can't be taken for granted no more in the younger generation. Only when trusted you can offer young people positive clues and a safe environment to develop their identity. "Have compassion for young people," as the Prophet, peace be upon him, taught.
- Be extra alert to the development of young people with social or familial ties to a radical group.
- Stimulate resilience:
  - In your sermons, include young people by using language they understand, and by addressing the issues they have to deal with.
  - Invest in knowledge of mainstream tradition and Sharia.
  - Stimulate your community in supporting young people in their struggle with identity, for example by mentoring or by creating possibilities for the individual to develop their talents. Sporting, youth groups and social activities can all provide a positive identity, and a potential social group. In fact, this is what many religious communities already provide. It doesn't need to be explicitly connected to prevention of radicalisation – better not.
  - Be aware of the legitimate means in your country to report or address discrimination. In cases in which you agree that discrimination has taken place, you can point these out to the person reporting it. "Deal justly: truly, God loves who deal justly." [Qur'an 49:9]

## 5 DEALING WITH YOUNGSTERS DEVELOPING SYMPATHY FOR RADICAL IDEAS

A first step on the path of radicalisation is often caused by feelings of frustration. Someone concludes that the actual social group (friends, community, ethnic or religious group) is not effective in combating experienced discrimination, and he or she starts to explore other options to fight injustice. This implies moving away from the mainstream, looking for groups which do provide a feeling that they are able to address discrimination or deprivation in a powerful way. They are open for radical ideas.

**This may be expressed in:**

- Displaying low self-efficacy and a tendency to attribute a lack of success not to circumstances or personal failure, but to discrimination and injustice. This may result in particular emotional expressions, like anger, fear, contempt, and disgust, coming more strongly to the surface. Displaying a loss of sense of legitimacy in authority (school, police, government, etc.). Instead, he or she may name new ideological leaders or role models.
- Displaying a heightened awareness of group identities and developing a sense of competition between groups. This may be expressed in for example in the use of an "us" versus "them" terminology, or in mentioning 'threats'.

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- Argumentative behaviour or provocative questions on interpretations of Sharia and Jihad.
  - Experiencing an event that has a high impact on his or her life, like the (sudden) loss of someone close, a complex dilemma that puts cultural or religious values under pressure, failure or a break up etc. In itself, this is not a cause or reason for radicalisation, but it may speed up processes – those events can then be considered a 'tipping point' or 'catalyst event'.

## DO

- Keep communication open and tolerant. Do not ask young people to choose one side all the time or to define themselves only in terms of religion or nationality. Remind them of the Islamic emphasis on the oneness of humanity as "Children of Adam." (Qur'an 49:13 etc.) At this stage, the processes are mainly psychological, not yet really translated into action. Remember that one of the major functions of the Prophets and Messengers of God is to help people with their self-purification and self-development (tazkiyat al-nafs).
- If you feel that an individual is attributing a lack of success to discrimination while no actual discrimination has taken place, it is vital that you challenge and question the perception of discrimination. Supporting attempts to improve the situation can be crucial in reaffirming a positive sense of identity and place in society. Remind them of the Qur'anic teaching of being fair to others, even your enemies or opponents: "O believers! ... Let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety ..." (5:8)
- Connect the vulnerable person with role models from within their own group. This can challenge the idea that a lack of success can be attributed to discrimination against that group.
- Support your community in challenging the "us versus them" thinking, by addressing their role in society in your sermons, and by sharing knowledge on radicalisation and the counterbalance a community can offer. Remind them that, according to the Qur'an, we have a common humanity as "Children of Adam" and must be fair to others, even our enemies or opponents. Sectarianism and tribalism are opposed to the spirit of the Qur'an (6:159, 16:92)
- Teach critical and nuanced thinking, offering tools with which to analyse radical narratives that they may get exposed to, especially on the internet.
- Make young people going through a hard time feel supported by you and the religious community. "Have compassion for young people," as the Prophet, peace be upon him, taught. People need spiritual and religious support through such events, e.g. "Patience is only at the first blow of a calamity" (hadith); "Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere, who say, when afflicted with calamity: "To Allah We belong, and to Him is our return" - They are those on whom (descend) blessings from Allah, and Mercy, and they are the ones that receive guidance." [Qur'an 2:155-157]
- Share your concerns about the possible impact of certain events with the other professionals in your network. Especially when it touches the core of religious values, you may have a better understanding of the real impact than they do. Your information may help them to support the person in the right way, too.

## 6 WHAT IF THEY REALLY JOIN A RADICAL GROUP?

The person may come into contact with groups who are actively seeking new recruits. At this point in the process, the demand – for a group which provides a clear identity and a means through which to address the perceived unfairness of society – is met with supply – groups actively recruiting. This is a very crucial point in the process. Once they get involved with a group, it will become harder to go back. At this point, the individual is keen to draw attention to the membership of the group, and to take on the clear identity it offers, so the change is often very visible.

Joining a radical group can show itself:

- **Verbally:**
  - Association with a new group
  - Different word choice, especially when it comes to words used to describe other religious or ethnic groups.
  - Change in personal narrative, setting it in the context of radical narratives
  - Overtly critical or negative on the effectiveness, customs or beliefs of the group one used to be part of
- **In behaviours:**
  - Seeking or having frequent contact with leaders of radical groups
  - Change in religious practices, for example extreme increase in devotion, a stronger emphasis on apocalyptic beliefs
  - Changing names, using aliases
- **Increase in the time spent on religious or radical websites in changes in physical appearance:**
  - A sudden increased devotion to prescriptions on clothing style and hair wear
  - The use of symbols from Jihadist groups on clothes or personal attributes

When recruitment is taking place, this may be visible in the form of new faces in the community, or new groups hanging around mosques. Recruiters may take advantage of mosques for 'talent-spotting' and as points of first contact, but once a contact has been established, they usually move away from the mosque and continue the recruitment in closed locations, such as private flats and makeshift prayer halls. So, when young people suddenly or gradually tend to withdraw from the community, this may also ring alarm bells.

### DO

- Remain aware that changes – even fairly small changes – in appearance and in peer group, can just be a normal adolescent search for identity, but also might go deeper than that. If you do observe changes, seek to discuss them with the individual, so that communication about their process remains open.
- When a person starts challenging your beliefs and values, be open for sincere discussion. "Religion is sincerity," as the Prophet, peace be upon him, taught. Do not just stick to the cognitive level though; also pay attention to the emotions, behaviours and group processes that come along.

*There are consequences to violence and you can be blinked from those consequences as a young person, but at some point in the future, if you survive, you will have to face up to them.*

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In itself, ideology won't cause radicalisation. Yet, as a vehicle for group bonding or legitimating aggressive feelings, it can be an influential dimension of radicalisation processes.

- Raise awareness of the tactics which may be used by extremist groups in a recruitment attempt, especially the use of biased and emotive narratives.
- When you suspect a group inside the mosque of radicalisation or recruitment, it is recommended not to send them away for fear of the authorities, but to stay in touch with the group and prevent them from easily getting isolated.
- Involve social workers, and youth workers, and (depending on the situation) even law enforcement in addressing groups which may be attempting to find new recruits by targeting a place of worship.

## DON'T

- Make the individual feel as though he's being singled out for special attention. His sense of identity at this point may be extremely fragile, and a feeling of threat to it may serve only to alienate him yet further from what he already perceives as a hostile society. "Be gentle with delicate, fragile, crystal-like hearts," as the Prophet, peace be upon him, taught.

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## 7 IF THEY INTEGRATE INTO THE RADICAL GROUP

Once a group has been selected, the individual tends to feel a strong desire to confirm his or her membership of it. Most of the indicators mentioned will show themselves more outspokenly, like change in clothing style, using aliases, strong us-and-them terminology, or different word choice.

**Other noticeable changes that may point to membership of an extremist group:**

- Forcing group rules on others, or challenging non-members who do not behave conform to the behaviour suggested by the group.
- Participation in closed meetings.
- Possession of propaganda material.
- Withdrawal from their previous social and leisure activities, becoming increasingly involved in activities connected with the new group.
- An increased sense of anger at society, and less participation in it. Most individuals at this point will share their views, partly to affirm their group membership and possibly with an indirect goal of finding new recruits. Note that this is very unhealthy for their spiritual balance: "If a person says, 'The people are destroyed,' he himself has been destroyed the most," as the Prophet, peace be upon him, taught.
- A sense that violence as a means of addressing unfairness within society is legitimate. They may commit minor crimes to express their disrespect for authorities. The teaching of the Prophet, peace be upon him, about "correcting evil with the hand" must be understood and taught as applying only to legitimate force, e.g. police and army, not to individuals or vigilante groups.

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**PATRICK MAGEE**  
FORMER IRA COMBATANT  
SPEAKER BUILDING BRIDGES FOR PEACE, UK

## DO

- Take these signals seriously.
- Try to prevent the individual from becoming increasingly isolated. Maintain communication as much as possible.
- Encourage them to resume social and leisure activities. "There is a time for this and a time for that," as the Prophet, peace be upon him, taught, i.e. there is a time for serious work and worship, and a time for rest, relaxation and entertainment.
- Where possible, discuss these changes with the vulnerable person's family and peer group. They may now be better positioned to maintain open communication with this person, and challenge the choices they are making.
- Discuss the costs of membership of the group.
- Involve law enforcement officers, other youth workers and social workers in sharing your concerns about the vulnerable individual. Also when someone totally loses contact with your community, this doesn't mean your responsibility ends. You can still share your concern about him having left.

## 8 IF THEY TURN INTO HARD CORE RADICALS

Once integrated, the individual may become more and more convinced of the legitimacy of the thoughts and actions of the radical group. They are now very sensitive to indoctrination and will become more and more obsessive about the goals of the group and preparation for (violent) action. At this point, their activities may take place outside your view.

**If you are still in contact with the person, you might see him or her:**

- Glorify martyrdom or violence.
- Abandon a more extreme "look" in an attempt to blend in with peers, so as to escape the notice of law enforcement personnel and other professional groups.
- Recruit and train new members of the group.
- Become more extreme in expressions of hate about those who do not share their views.
- Threaten other group members who try to leave the group.
- Produce written or video material about his or her intentions.
- Making preparations for or actually going on training travel.
- (Planning to) travel to a foreign country to join in a war.

## DO

- Make sure that law enforcement personnel are aware of your concerns. It is at this point that genuinely dangerous and violent activities may begin, so it's really crucial to inform the police.

## DON'T

- Assume that abandoning of the "look" associated with the group necessarily means that the person is taking a distance from the group and reintegrating. This may in fact be true – but quite the opposite might be happening, too.

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## 9 SUPPORTING THE PARENTS

Often parents are the first to see early warning signs, but it may be hard for them to find the right way to respond.

They may come to you:

- feeling that they lack the knowledge to counter the radical narratives their child comes up with.
- not knowing who else to turn to, since they fear the potential consequences of reporting signs to police or law enforcement.
- feeling that they lose contact with their child and maybe even fearing what he's capable of.

Whenever they do so, take them seriously:

- Don't try to reassure them too quickly.
- Provide a safe space where they can express their worries.
- Help them in finding solid arguments and the right tone to discuss ideology.
- Discuss with them if they'd allow you to use your network to find appropriate support for this family.

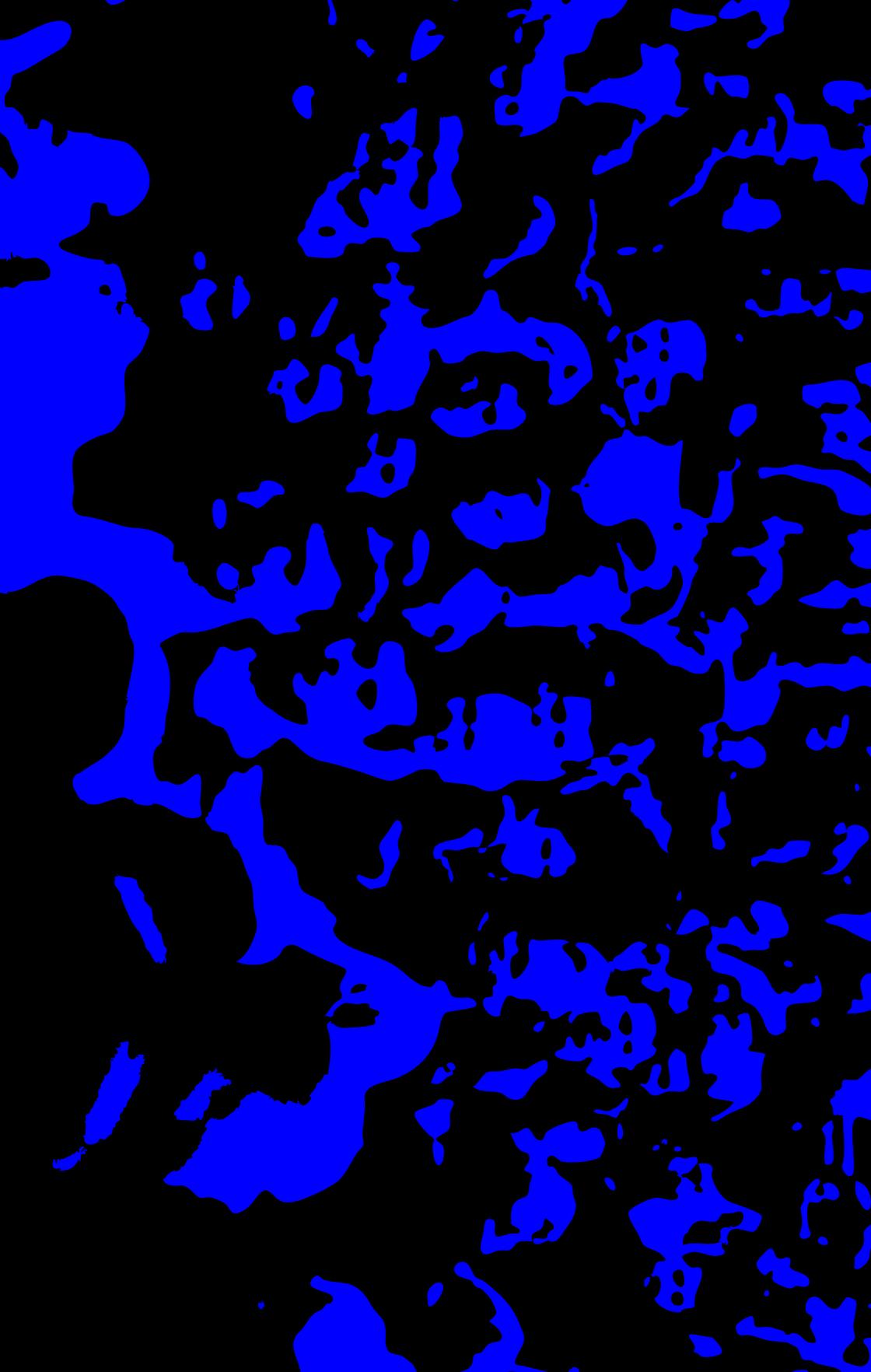
In the early phases of the radicalisation process, support may be found inside your network, for example in a social worker or someone who can support the parents with advice on education and information about normal processes in adolescence. In some countries, de-radicalisation specialists can be called in for help, for example by coaching parents, or mentoring a youngster who is prepared to leave the radical group. Some countries also offer family programs for de-radicalisation. Be aware of the possibilities in your country.

Several research projects on support for families encountering radicalisation are still running, so be alert to whatever becomes available.

*I followed my son into the mosque but he did not want to talk to me. But I met the Imam there, and he helped me to make contact again with my son.*

(Anonymous, mother of a radical)

This manual was designed to help you to recognise and address radicalisation within the group you come into professional contact with. If you would like more information about this project, or further resources, please visit our website [www.terra-net.eu](http://www.terra-net.eu)



The material you can find in this Toolkit and online on [www.terratookit.eu](http://www.terratookit.eu) has been designed for professionals who come into contact through their work with a population which may be vulnerable to radicalisation. It explains why this subject may be of relevance to you, how you might notice if this issue was developing, and what you can do about it. Manuals which contain a fuller picture of this problem and an approach to solving it, and short fact sheets, can both be downloaded from the website free of charge.



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