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Violent Extremism

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'Violent extremism' is rarely defined: neither the United Nations nor the European Union has an official definition. USAID defines it as "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives". However, this apparently simple and obvious statement conceals a great deal of controversy and uncertainty. Is violent extremism, by definition, something carried out by non-state actors? In conflict situations, how can we differentiate violent extremists from other, more legitimate conflict actors? Does violent extremism always have to be ideological – can it, for example, be criminal, or even purposeless? Is 'violent extremism' merely a synonym for 'terrorism'? More fundamentally, are terms like 'extremism' relative – in which case does 'violent extremism' mean different things to different people? These are not merely academic questions: what we call a phenomenon helps determine how we see it and what we do in response to it.

'Violent extremism' is usually considered to be a more inclusive term than 'terrorism', although they are broadly synonymous in use. Further, although USAID's definition is wide, 'violent extremism' is arguably applied much more narrowly – i.e. to Islamist violence alone, ignoring the many other forms of ideologically motivated or justified violence that affect countries. There is a huge literature on terrorism, but even some of the most prolific authorities on the topic bemoan the generally poor state of data and methodology in the field. Much remains speculative, unknown or uncertain. Disparate phenomena tend to be aggregated; key terms are poorly defined. Most work in the field has focused on why and how people become drawn into terrorism – the problem now usually referred to as 'radicalisation' – and how violent extremist groups and networks are organised. Most of this work is on terrorism in or threatening the West. Less work has been done on violent extremists in the countries where they do most damage – most violent extremism affects countries in Asia and Africa. Researchers are only now beginning to examine the various responses to violent extremism, which can be classified under three headings: counter-terrorism (CT, e.g. using military or policing resources to deter or disrupt terrorists), countering violent extremism (CVE –

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preventative approaches using mostly non-coercive means), and risk reduction (seeking to ensure that violent extremists do not cause harm, e.g. through efforts to change behaviour).

The readings below examine what violent extremism is, how people become violent extremists, why they do so, where violent extremism takes place (and how it affects the West and Asia/Africa very differently), and what can be done about it.

Key readings

Reading 1: Schmid, A. P. (2014). *Violent and non-violent extremism: Two sides of the same coin.* ICCT Research Paper. The Hague: International Center for Counterterrorism (ICCT).
http://www.trackingterrorism.org/sites/default/files/chatter/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014_0.pdf

Reading 2: Sedgwick, M. (2012). *Radicalism isn't the problem: it's the move to violence we need to counter.* Lancaster/London: Westminster Faith Debates.
http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/1329816534_Mark-Sedgwick-radicalization-final.pdf

How do we know what violent extremism is, and how can we differentiate it from non-violent extremism? Schmid attempts to clarify terms, including 'extremism' and 'violent extremism', before arguing that any distinction between the two terms is invalid: so-called 'non-violent extremism', at least when it is practised by Islamists, has he says no place in Western democracies. This paper also includes a list of twenty indicators of extremism, including non-violent but undesirable behaviours such as expressing intolerance. Sedgwick takes a diametrically opposite view, arguing that what is extreme is determined by social norms and views held to be extreme in the West might actually be mainstream in, for example, parts of the Middle East. He concludes that what distinguishes violent extremism is the violence, and attempting to counter 'non-violent extremism' might actually make violent extremism more likely.

Reading 3: Borum, R. (2011). Radicalization into violent extremism II: A review of conceptual models and empirical research. *Journal of Strategic Security 4* (4): 37-62.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1140&context=jss

Reading 4: Francis, M. (2012). What causes radicalisation? Main lines of consensus in recent research. *Radicalisation Research*. Lancaster, UK: Lancaster University.
http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/guides/francis-2012-causes-2/

The vast size of the literature on radicalisation, terrorism and violent extremism does not mean that these phenomena are well-understood. The term 'radicalisation' is generally used to mean the process by which individuals leave the mainstream and become extreme in either views or behaviour, or both. It is viewed by some experts as inadequate or misleading, while amongst its advocates there is no consensus as to how the process might work. Borum reviews the many and varied models of radicalisation into violent extremism and concludes that they are largely uninformed by either evidence or theory, but that some models may be better than others. The paper has a useful summary of assumptions which are generally supported by academic research into violent extremism which include: radicalisation may have many causes or factors, not one; there may be many different pathways to violence, and (conversely) different people on a shared trajectory may have many different destinations; some join extremist groups because of ideology

but others may come to accept an ideology because they have joined an extremist group; it is possible to be 'radical' and non-violent; and that radicalisation is a dynamic, psycho-social process. Francis attempts a synthesis of existing theories and models into one which seeks to capture the complexity and variability of radicalisation. He posits three broad categories of factors in the radicalisation process (situational, strategic and ideological) and sub-divides situational factors into pre-conditions and precipitant factors, before sub-dividing pre-conditions into enabling and motivational factors.

Reading 5: Wolffe, J. and Moorhead, G. (2014). *Religion, security and global uncertainties.* Milton Keynes: The Open University.
http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/religion-martyrdom-global-uncertainties/sites/www.open.ac.uk.arts.research.religion-martyrdom-global-uncertainties/files/files/ecms/arts-rmgu-pr/web-content/Religion-Security-Global-Uncertainties.pdf

Reading 6: Gelfand, M.; LaFree, G.; Fahey, S.; & Feinberg, E. (2013). Culture and extremism. *Journal of Social Issues* 69 (3): 495-517.
http://www.gelfand.umd.edu/Gelfand%20Culture%20and%20Extremism.pdf

What causes individuals to be radicalised and violent extremist groups to form? Of the many 'root causes' or drivers that have been proposed, religion is one of the most controversial. The editors of the Open University paper canvassed a range of academics working on security and religion who agreed that religion can contribute to security threats such as violent extremism, but it is seldom a threat in itself. Religion may be used to frame a violent response to a set of circumstances, and what we call religious affiliation may actually be a marker of identity – and identity has long been viewed by psychologists as an important dimension of group violence. Moving beyond the simplistic argument over whether religion does or does not lead to violence, Gelfand, LaFree et al. examine a large terrorism database for correlations between specific cultural variables in societies and political violence. They tentatively conclude that fatalistic beliefs, rigid gender roles, and the degree to which a society is bound by rules and norms ('cultural tightness') are positively correlated with terrorist violence.

Reading 7: Institute for Economics and Peace. (2015). *Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and understanding the impact of terrorism.* Sydney, Australia: IEP.
http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf

What is the impact of terrorism and violent extremism, and where is that impact felt? The Global Terrorism Index uses data from the most authoritative academic terrorism database to measure the economic and human impact of terrorism, and reaches some surprising conclusions: in 2014, 78% of terrorism occurred in just five countries (Iraq, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria), and only 2.6% of deaths from terrorism since 2000 occurred in the West (most of which were on 11 September 2001); in 2014 most (70%) deaths from terrorism in the West resulted from 'lone actor' attacks, and most (80%) of these were not Islamist; terrorism is strongly correlated with governance failures such as state-sponsored political violence, human rights observance, and a country's overall safety and security. The report also includes essays on the growth of ISIL, the challenges and opportunities of measuring terrorism, the controversy over whether violent extremism is related to migration, and foreign fighters.

Reading 8: USAID. (2011). *The development response to violent extremism and insurgency. USAID Policy.* Washington D.C.: USAID.
https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI_Policy_Final.pdf

Reading 9: Khalil, J. and M. Zeuthen. (2014). A case study of counter violent extremism (CVE) programming: Lessons from OTI's Kenya transition initiative. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development 3* (1).
http://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.ee/

Issues of violent extremism are usually countered by what are sometimes called 'hard' security measures: military, law-enforcement or covert responses that involve force, the criminal justice system or (most controversially) extra-judicial processes. However while 'softer' responses to terrorism are not new, they have become increasingly prominent in governmental and multilateral responses. Countering violent extremism (CVE) is a new term that lacks a consistent definition but is generally held to mean preventative measures which seek to address drivers or root causes of violent extremism. It is helpful to distinguish this from risk reduction interventions, such as so-called 'deradicalisation programmes', which seek to reduce the threat from individuals or groups which have already engaged in violent extremism. USAID's pamphlet sets out best practice in how development agencies may contribute to the CVE effort, and its influential model for understanding the causes of violent extremism in terms of 'push' and 'pull' factors . Khalil and Zeuthen's paper is a rare example of an independent evaluation of a CVE initiative in the public domain. It proposes some refinement to how violent extremism problems are diagnosed and recommends a more focused approach to interventions through the identification of groups at risk of radicalization.

Questions to guide reading

1. Terms such as radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism notoriously slippery. Does this matter? How might this affect what governments and agencies do in response? Can we develop better, more consistent definitions?
2. What are the methodological traps in researching and writing on violent extremism? How effectively do the authors of these papers distinguish between fact, analysis and opinion? How can we improve the evidence base in this field?
3. Is it possible to conceptualise or theorise violent extremism? Or is it such a diverse, context-dependent and contingent set of problems that we should simply accept that each case is different and try to understand it as best we can?
4. Can we better understand the relationship between religious belief and violence – or is religion a red herring? Does looking at more specific cultural factors pay dividends?
5. What are the implications for government policy and development practice of the fact that most violent extremism takes place in a handful of countries in Asia and Africa?
6. How can we be clearer about what CVE actually is? Is it the answer to violent extremism? What are the strengths and weaknesses in CVE methodology when compared with other types of intervention?

Further resources

Allan, H.; Glazzard, A.; Jesperson, S; et al. (2015). *Drivers of violent extremisms: Hypotheses and literature review.* London: Royal United Services Institute.
http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/Misc_Gov/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf

Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2016). *Preventing radicalisation to terrorism and violent extremism: Approaches and practices*. The Netherlands: Radicalisation Awareness Network
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices/docs/ran_collection-approaches_and_practices_en.pdf