Violent extremism: The journey in and the pathway out

Understanding and addressing violent extremism goes beyond just ideology. Morten Bøås of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs suggests that looking at the underlying reasons and addressing its root cause might be crucial to finding solutions

Defining violent extremism is like grabbing slippery soap. Most of us have ideas about what violent extremism is, what type of acts of violence qualify, and what kinds of ideologies and belief systems that we would say promote it.

What is violent extremism?

The challenge, however, is that the definition of violent extremism is almost exclusively subjective. What one person deems as violent extremism may be perfectly justifiable for another.

Indiscriminate violence can be part of a strategy of asymmetrical warfare against a much stronger opponent, or violence can be considered legitimate against someone defined as the enemy, an intruder, or an unbeliever – blasphemous enemies of God that deserve whatever punishment those on the right side of religion (and thereby history) see fit to expose them to.

The current war in Gaza and how differently this is viewed depending on what side one belongs to or simply how one chooses to interpret the conflict illustrates this tragically well.

People simply disagree on what is what. While there is no universally accepted definition of violent extremism, it has, consequently, not been codified in international law.

The study of violent extremism

While a universal definition is lacking, the study of violent extremism is a crowded field. Disagreements are frequent, but violent extremism is also commonly associated with certain specific features. It tends to involve non-state armed groups who employ asymmetrical tactics of war, including attacks on civilian targets and populations.

This means that violent extremism as a field of inquiry associated with insurgencies and groups defined as terrorists has been examined almost since the dawn of war studies.

The shock of the September 11 attacks against New York and the Pentagon, however, led to an intense focus on the manifestations of violent extremism, on the actors involved, and the attacks committed. This resulted in a vast amount of literature, and much of what

was produced gave us important insights into the history and dynamics of groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

However, the intense focus on the manifestations of violent extremism and the persons behind them also unfortunately contributed to the creation of a blind zone.

Not only the leaders of groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State but also their rank-and-file fighters and followers around the globe were considered die-hard violent extremist militants. People were so fully radicalised into the world of violent extremism that a violent extremist agenda had come to engulf their entire persona.

Political ethnography on militant youth

No doubt radicalised leaders and cadres exist. However, this is not necessarily the case for most of those involved. On the contrary, research inspired by political ethnography on militant youth carried out by the author and colleagues in environments ranging from North Africa, and the Sahel to the Middle East and the Western Balkans shows that radicalisation and mobilisation into the world of violent extremism are firmly connected to the social worlds of these youths.

The journey into extremism is not necessarily dislodged from their ordinary lives, but a pathway to provide an alternative social order to improve life chances. It is, therefore, the situationality of the turn to extremist worldviews that we need to understand.

Salafi-Islam extremism

This is well illustrated by a recent data set from the Sahel – one of the current global hotspots of Salafi-Islam extremism, established by the author and colleagues. Respondents were asked if they knew somebody who had joined one of the insurgent groups inspired by extremist Salafi interpretations in the region, and if they said 'yes', they were asked why they thought this person had joined such a group.

Very few of the responses we obtained referred to religion or ideology. Instead, the main reference points were insecurity, lack of employment, education, and other economic opportunities, and not the least repression by government forces.

This means that becoming part of an armed movement that commonly is defined as a terrorist group may have less to do with an all-consuming conviction to the ideology of extremism but rather should be seen as a pragmatic pose that is context-determined.

Deradicalisation as the way out of extremism?

Thus, if somebody has gone through a process of radicalisation where the person ends up as a being of pure conviction, it makes sense to focus on programs of deradicalisation as the pathway out of extremism.

However, if the journey into extremism is much more context determined, and thereby also by the situation's circumstances, foregrounding deradicalisation may have little effect and could even lead to opposite results as it could rubberstamp them a danger to society.

Focusing on the material dynamics that made the person journey into extremism may yield much better and more sustainable results. Taking the material grievances that made them take the path to extremism seriously in policies and programming is therefore crucial.

Violent extremism closing remarks

Likewise, much ado has been made about the anti-state and anti-modernity agenda of contemporary violent extremist movements. However, if many of those who embarked on the journey to extremism did this not out of religious conviction or ideological motivation, it is good reason to believe that what they crave isn't a return to a medieval state. Instead, they may search for a modernity and a state that works for them and not as they have experienced a modernity that is not for them and a state that works against them.

Policies and programming that take the lived experiences of those who set out on a journey into violent extremism into consideration, therefore, have a much better chance of yielding positive results than those that see radicalisation as a closed door of conviction.

What this means is that if we want to bring people back from the world of violent extremism, we need to seriously examine why they took this path in the first place.

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