

Radicalisation, Extremism and Militancy

Not a new threat



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Acts of radicalisation, extremism and militancy — especially in several Muslim countries — have been dominating the news and socio-political discussions over the last few years. However, while extremism and radicalisation is a burgeoning phenomenon, it did not happen suddenly. It is important, therefore, to identify the root causes of extremism and militancy. A careful examination of history reveals that extremism and radicalisation have always been a problem throughout history and know no religious, ethnic or national boundaries. Extremist-driven political, ethnic and religious ideologies have been responsible for mass deaths, displacement and general conflict in Africa, Europe and Asia — sometimes requiring the intervention of the international community. Hence, there is a need to properly identify the causes of extremism today and where the narrative of extremism finds the most traction.

The reaction against extremism today is largely a reaction to the symptoms and not the causes of extremism. This is an ineffective preventative measure. If the reaction of the state is largely confined to a violent response, extremists will fight back as they are doing today with deadly results. The fear that an adversary is accumulating too much power leads one to rush into conflict without actually understanding the adversary. Nervous reactions to misunderstood and overblown threats can lead to disastrous consequences. In combating extremism, states should avoid falling into a Thucydides Trap. Acts of extremism by some cannot be attributed to the whole community of faith. Such responses will only play into the hands of the extremists, enlarging the conflict and causing more misery and death.

Radicalisation and Muslim communities

The advent of groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Boko Haram — which have become the poster boys of extremism and radicalisation today — has done tremendous damage to mainstream Islam and caused instability and chaos in regions where they operate. Besides transnational groups, extremism in the Muslim world today is also committed by elements of 'Islamic governments' through their warped understanding of the religion. The majority of the extremist actions though have political aims and thus political repercussions.

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In addressing the role of Islam in extremist narratives however, some issues should be clarified. First, there are differences within the interpretations and practices of the various sects of Islam, which are at times in conflict with each other. The challenge is to find common ground, especially in espousing moderate ideals and practices. The strengthening of critical thought and analysis in reviewing extremist dogma by the religious intelligencia in Islam is critical in developing a counter-narrative. Second, unlike Christianity, there is no separation of the church and state in Islam and the amalgamation of power and faith presents another set of challenges. Muslims often look to the state for guidance on religious affairs. The failure of the state to play this role but instead espouses an extremist and narrow narrative of Islam further compounds the problem. Despite a separation of mosque and state being practiced by the Ottoman Sultanate, it did not last. Politics, power and faith are closely intertwined in Islam and this provides both opportunities and challenges in developing and implementing counter-extremist narratives.

Extremism begets extremism and as extremism spreads in the Muslim world, Islam and Muslims will be seen as responsible for extremist acts of violence. This, in turn, is and



Participants at the roundtable

will be matched by the spread of ill-feeling among communities and rising extremist Islamophobia. In the Western global media and general perception of non-Muslims, Islam and Muslims are often associated with terrorism and extremism. Even some Muslims are beginning to believe that their fellow believers are closely associated with such acts. However, studies in the US and Europe show that right up until 2005 and 2008, a very small percentage — below 9 per cent — of terrorist acts have been committed by Muslims. Hence, while Islamic extremism is a concern, it should not be a cause for hysteria. While radicalisation and violence is rife in the Middle East, it has much less appeal to the majority of Muslims in Southeast Asia, where a more moderate version of Islam is practiced.

Issues driving the narrative

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A variety of reasons are behind the phenomenon of extremism. These include history, politics, sociology, ideology and economics. Included among them are historical landmarks like the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 that carved up the Ottoman Caliphate, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 that led to the creation of Israel in Palestine, the continued occupation of Palestine by Israel, predatory Western interventions in the Middle East to guarantee its energy security, misguided regime changes in Iraq and Libya without adequate follow-up on long term political and governance solutions, the longstanding Afghan internal turmoil, incidents like Abu Ghraib, the atavistic worldview and nihilist fanaticism of the Salafist Wahhabism, the disaffection from the failure of the Arab Spring to generate true democratic or economic uplift and the socio-economic marginalisation of Muslim youth, whether in the Muslim world or in immigrant societies in the West.

Two key issues, namely the lack of good governance and citizen representation, are closely associated with the spread of extremism. While a small number of extremists exist in every society, social norms will normally curtail them. However, in some states — especially the majority of Muslim states — such norms are characterised by poverty, repression, corruption and unaccountable governance. Extremists are then able to successfully appeal to a disenfranchised population to strike out against the perceived injustices of life. Poverty, largely driven by the issues above, also plays a huge part in brewing extremism. Despite being rich in resources, large numbers of citizens in Muslim countries do not benefit from them and this leads to feelings of bitterness and disenfranchisement. Coupled with anger against Western offensive actions such as drone strikes and military interventions in some Muslim countries,

Muslims feel targeted and are lashing back against the perception of being under attack.

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A culmination of all these has rendered radicalisation, in general, the narrative propagated by extremists like ISIL, which is attractive with its powerful emotive and historical emotive content. The disaffected are attracted to a narrative that promises rewards through sacrifice despite statements by Islamic scholars that such martyrdom is only achievable when the cause is just. The radical narrative is further justified by the use of Islamic symbolism and pseudo-religious propaganda that calls on the faithful to join in the battle to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate and prepare for the 'final Jihad'. While the actions of the 'Islamist Caliphate' are not Islamic but a distortion of the Islamic faith, faith has been successfully used as a powerful strategic tool by the extremists.

An effective counter-narrative is needed

While military responses may delay the progress of extremist beliefs, they cannot eliminate the ideology behind the violence and will surely draw a retaliatory response, especially on soft targets in the West. New technologies and an adaptation of asymmetrical warfare have given militant extremists a further reach than ever before. What is needed is the formation of a counter-narrative that is designed to defang and persuade the extremists of the folly of their ways. Genuine grievances of those attracted to extremism should be addressed and disadvantaged minorities should not be further alienated as it could make the prospects of revenge more attractive.

Rehabilitation programmes, like those implemented in several Southeast Asian states, are key to bringing those who have strayed back to the mainstream. Here, one should note the lack of widespread appeal of extremism among Muslims in Southeast Asia as social conditions, including the practice of democracy, are much more favourable here when compared with the Middle East and other Muslim dominated states. The challenge, however, is to keep the influence of extremists at a minimum in favour of stability and peace through good governance and upholding the rights of all citizens, including minority rights.



Elmira Akhmetova

Radicalisation is a complex, multifaceted problem that requires an equally complex, integrated strategy to defeat it. There is no silver bullet or magic solution. This requires the coordination of governments, civil society organisations and the private sector. In order to develop a successful counter-narrative, the following considerations should be taken into account:

1. Enhancing strategic communication by integrating de-radicalisation training via the media, drawing on national and local traditions to develop stronger counter-narratives, using sports, cultural and social media platforms.
2. Strengthening the rule of law mechanisms through community policing, supporting victims of radicalisation, appropriate training for enforcement and judicial officers and ensuring fair legislation.
3. Supporting civil society and private sector efforts on de-radicalisation.
4. Including a gender dimension in all aspects of de-radicalisation. Research indicates that a growing number of women have been attracted to radical groups in Syria and see it as a 'liberating experience'. Women, therefore, should be given a key



Participants at the discussion

role in developing the counter-narrative and in law enforcement agencies besides inculcating gender sensitisation among front-line officials.

5. Better regional and international cooperation especially in capacity building for states that need assistance in combating extremism.
6. Introducing de-radicalisation curriculum in schools. This needs the concentrated efforts of the government, private sector and community organisations. Intellectual intervention must aim to change local cultures and values where necessary.

Combating extremism is a multifaceted, international effort

Another key element in the battle against extremism and militancy is proper coordination, to ensure there are no missteps that damage ongoing efforts. Hence, the role of multinational institutions like the United Nations (UN) is important not just in terms of coordinating responses but also as a safeguard against unilateral actions by nation states that could worsen the divide. This will ensure that the equilibrium between preventative actions and the rule of law is maintained. Unilateral military actions taken by the United States and Israel are often examples that come to mind.

While some alteration of the workings of the UN — especially the Security Council — is highly desirable to enable it to become more representative, it is still one of the best placed entities to support and guide, if not spearhead de-radicalisation efforts, on a macro scale. As political and social factors — rather than religious doctrine — are major driving forces behind extremism, the UN has the expertise and experience in matters of socio-economic development to make positive contributions to states and communities that require such assistance. The UN and other affiliated organisations could appoint respected elder statesmen and diplomats — a panel of ‘wise persons’ — to oversee the process and ensure no red lines are crossed. Thus, the importance and capacities of such international institutions should not be dismissed despite several perceived shortcomings.

The need to work towards peace

In opposing extremism, especially extremism influenced by religion and culture, one must always be mindful of the sensitivities and beliefs of others in this battle of ideas. In that regard, the strategy of decision makers in Southeast Asia, who have opted to

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confront radicalisation with soft approaches, should be commended as they rightly recognise that defeating extremism is not just a physical struggle but one against the wrong ideology and thinking to make sure that the radicals do not define the agenda with their narrative.

Ultimately, the success of all these efforts rests on the work done on a local level in addressing local grievances and perceived injustices. It is also important to remember that there is no single narrative in the Muslim world, both in promoting extremism and in combating it. Hence it is important to identify and act on the root causes of extremism to properly and effectively confront and contain it. Peace minded individuals, organisations, governments and communities must continue to work towards de-radicalisation, peace and reconciliation as the fallout of not doing so will be disastrous to all.

*In conjunction with a visit by a delegation from the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) in Singapore on 21 January 2015, ISIS Malaysia hosted a closed-door roundtable discussion on the evolving threat of extremism and militancy to South and Southeast Asia. Addressing this roundtable was **Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury**, Principal Research Fellow from ISAS, and **Dr Elmira Akhmetova**, Research Fellow from the Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia. The issues raised in this article were taken from their discussions. ISIS Analyst **Thomas Daniel** reports.*