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One Size Does Not Fit All:

The Challenge with Defining and Understanding Violent Extremism and Other Related Concepts

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Executive summary

This paper investigates how the concepts such as violent extremism, radicalization, terrorism, foreign fighters, and right-wing extremism are depicted in the literature, and analyses why the way they are defined matters. This paper concludes that there is an inherent bias in the existing definitions that also impacts policymaking and potentially adds to the troubles of the government affected by these phenomena. The paper calls for more support for local think-tanks to produce local knowledge on these concepts, in order to design better public policies for preventing and countering violent extremism.

Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, against the United States brought to the centre of attention to the issue of terrorism and its impact on international peace and security. Western-led coalitions followed to fight terrorism. Weak and failing states were seen as important contributing factors to terrorism, and therefore state-building interventions became important policy response, and an opportunity to expand the liberal peace thesis. But, fighting against an enemy not defined in traditional terms, carried significant challenges, including a lack of proper definition of the concept. As the fight against terrorism proliferated, notions such as violent extremism, radicalization, foreign fighters, gained a lot of traction across the globe. Often, these notions were often used as euphemisms that targeted the Islam religion. So, the question is, how we're different terminologies pertaining to terrorist attacks/acts defined in academia and thinks-tanks? Does the way these terminologies are defined affect policy processes? How are these notions used in social media? And lastly, how does definition affect the phenomenon of violent extremism? These are the key questions this paper seeks to answer.

The main argument of this paper is that the existing framework of terminologies about violent extremism lacks a local understanding, and this adds to the challenges of the governments to design policies on P/CVE. The argument is organized into two main sections. The next section examines the definitions of the concepts such as terrorism, right-wing terrorism, foreign fighters, radicalization and violent extremism. This is followed by a section that discusses implications for policy, and a concluding note that highlights the inherently flawed nature of the existing body of literature on defining these concepts.

I- Agree to disagree examining the discussion over key concepts of violent extremism and radicalization

This section examines how academia and civil society approached the following concepts: terrorism, radicalization, violent extremism, right-wing extremism, foreign fighters. The paper investigates the definitions of these concepts.

1- Terrorism

Terrorism has produced a considerable amount of research in recent years. However, the ample body of literature on the subject has not been able to produce a consensus on the definition of the term. This lack of commonly accepted definition is odd when one considers that as early as 1937 international community was making efforts to define the phenomenon. The League of Nations at the time had defined terrorism as: "All criminal acts directed against a State and intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons or a group of persons or the general public" (Ruperez, 2006, p. 2). The field of terrorism research has been criticized for utilizing flawed methodological and conceptual approaches, which include a heavy reliance on secondary data, especially media reporting. This has not helped consensus-building on the meaning of terrorism, despite being seen as a global threat to international peace and security. Bart Schuurman holds that "new concerns have arisen over the quality of the quantitative research being conducted and the tendency to design research based on the available data, rather than gathering the data required to address a particular question" (Schuurman, 2018, p. 3).

In the post-September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the main focus of the research has been on Islamic inspired terrorism. Andrew Silke had warned, that narrow focus, "runs the real risk of losing an understanding of the broader context of terrorist conflicts, patterns and trends and without such awareness, important lessons can be missed" (Silke, 2008, p. 45). In this sense, the efforts to define terrorism have suffered from a perception of an inherent conceptual flaw or bias. In this context, different factors have contributed to the divisions in understanding and defining terrorism, including those trying to affiliate the phenomenon to a particular political, ethnic or religious agenda/ideology. Ambiguous and generalized definitions of terrorism, that persist in academia, have not stopped governments to establish definitions of terrorism in their respective criminal codes/legislation. This approach has affected also think-tanks, who have overly focused on treating the issue of terrorism as an issue of rule of law, missing the broader context and adding to the problem. What

is even more concerning is that think-tanks from the parts of the world that have been affected by the phenomena of terrorism – such as Western Balkans – do not seem interested in promoting their understanding of terrorism, and have resorted into adopting definitions from EU or other international actors, such as IOM.

The dominant definition that is adopted today by think-tank and academia of terrorism seems to be an adoption of the definition provided in the EU Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism (EU, 2002). Terrorism is widely accepted as a means towards an end, which is to say it refers to the promoting violence and committing violent acts in pursuit of an ideological outcome. However, the lack of efforts to establish an understanding of terrorism based on experience and one that corresponds to the local context misses the broader context that hinders efforts to prevent and counter-terrorism. Having a proper and agreed definition of terrorism is important, because in recent years, international actors and governments, think-tanks and media have in one way or the contributed to the euphemizing of terrorism with religion, and in particular Islam. The misleading term, such as 'Islam terror' has been so pervasive that it led o bizarre situations, that terrorist acts committed by White and non-Muslim individuals were not referred to as terrorists (Jetter). This has been particularly the case with the far-right inspired violence and terrorism, which is the next issue that this paper examines.

2- Right-wing extremism

Amid the focus on Islamic inspired extremism, the far-right terrorism or right-wing extremism (RWE) was largely neglected. However, in recent years there is a growing acknowledgement of its threats as well as the link between far right and terrorism. The UN's Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), in their April 2020 Trend Alerts, emphasizes that:

> "Experts have identified extreme right-wing terrorism - also referred to as far-right or racially and ethnically motivated terrorism - as a unique form of political violence with often fluid boundaries between hate crime and organized terrorism. It is a not a coherent or easily defined movement, but rather a shifting, the complex and overlapping milieu of individuals, groups and movements (online and offline) espousing different but related ideologies, often linked by hatred and racism toward minorities, xenophobia, islamophobia or anti-Semitism" (CTED, 2020, p. 1)

In the literature right-wing extremism (RWE) is depicted as racist, pro-Nazi, ultranationalist, hatred groups, towards particular religious or racial identities and immigrants (Dinas, Georgiadou, Konstantinidis, & Rori, 2016). However, unlike other forms of violent extremism, such as Islamic-violent extremism, efforts to

prevent and counter the RWE are ignored, or there is an inherent bias in programs and policies that tackle violent extremism. Ryan Scrivens and Barbara Perry note that "[…] there has been a clear bias towards countering those who are inspired by radical Islam. Indeed, there is even a failure to acknowledge RWE as a phenomenon worthy of attention. The legal label of "terrorist," for example, is far less likely to be applied to RWEs." (Scrivens & Perry, 2017, p. 537).

The right-wing extremism is considered widespread in the Balkans, and especially Serbia. The far-right leader, Vojislav Šešelj, and his party the Serbian Radical Party has 22 members in the National Assembly of Serbia, making it the largest opposition group. According to Jovo Bakic: "One of the chief elements motivating far-rightists to act is their perception of enemies. All of them perceive the West (i. e. the EU, NATO, USA, IMF), political parties in Serbia, the far left, and the LGBT population as their enemies, while they regard Russia not only as a friend but as a Slav brother" (Bakic, 2013, p. 5). In addition to this, the far-right in Serbia is also characterized as embodying a particular racist approach towards Albanians in Kosovo. Like Kosovo, Serbia also faced its foreign-fighter problem. Based on Ukraine estimates "about 300 Serbs are or have been fighting on its territory" with the pro-Russian groups (Zivanovic, 2020). In 2014 the Serbian authorities criminalized participation of their citizens in foreign conflict and have so far convicted 25 citizens for participating in the Ukrainian conflict (Ibid.,). However, there is an evident difference in how countering the phenomenon of foreign fighters was treated by civil society in the case of Serbia and Kosovo, with the latter often being paraded as a case study and flooded with funds for government and NGO-s to address the issue. Part of the reason why this has been the case is the way these terminologies have been utilized by civil society, academia, and government as well.

3- Foreign fighters

The concept of foreign fighters often seems self-explanatory, but as noted in the previous section, it is more complex. Like terrorism, as Barak Mendelsohn notes, "The phenomenon of foreign fighters, in which volunteers leave their homes and intervene in a clash taking place in a foreign location, is hardly new. Mercenary camps, often comprising warriors from different backgrounds, holding no particular allegiance to the authorities in their place of origin, have had a ubiquitous presence on the battlefield throughout human history" (Mendelsohn, 2011, p. 189). However, also as with terrorism, the concept of foreign fighters has been often used interchangeably with Muslims. This is also evident in the literature which is dominated by research on 'Islamic foreign fighters.' For instance, the results for 'foreign fighters' in Google scholar are dominated by reference to Muslims. This underlining assumption that foreign fighters are mainly a problem

coming from Muslim communities, has also affected the way the response has been designed, often with ideas developed in far centres in Western capitals that are detached from the reality. Therefore, understanding the phenomenon of foreign fighters and responding to the challenge, has been mainly about implementing templates lacking local ownership. Adding to this situation was the complacency of the local think-tanks in regions affected by the phenomenon of foreign fighters, especially in the Western Balkans, that have yet to produce a high-quality local research-response to the mainly Western-led body of literature on the subject.

A significant part of the research on foreign fighters in academia has focused on the issue of identities and loyalties of foreign fighters and how that might explain their motivations, as well as on the approaches that have been utilized to recruit foreign fighters. Concerning the literature, Thomas Hegghammer notes that: "There are descriptions of foreign fighter involvement in individual conflicts, but almost no cross-case analyses or theoretically informed attempts at explaining their appearance" (Hegghammer, 2011, p. 54). Foreign fighters are a complex and diverse group, coming from the different ethnic, cultural, social and economic background. Accordingly, they have different motivations for deciding to join a foreign conflict (Malet, 2013). However, often the research seems to promote that a 'one size fits all' approach, looking mainly at religion. In this sense, central to the research on foreign fighters has been the issue of 'messages' that are used to recruit foreign fighters. For instance, Jytte Klausen explains that: "A multi-year study of the content of jihadist Internet forums found that the forums were dominated by discussions of doctrine, the dissemination of information about "good" versus "bad" Koranic interpretation, and the distribution of Al Qaeda–approved tracts" (Klausen, 2015, p. 2). The research on the strategies and tactics of recruitment of the foreign fighters while serving an important challenge, it is relevant always not to miss the broader context. In this sense, while studying and examining the manifestation of the phenomenon of foreign fighters, having a proper understanding of the nature and root causes of the conflict they are joining is equally important. For instance, the Syrian conflict could not simply be explained through the religion, but other issues such as sectarianism need to be taken into consideration, which brings us to the question of what radicalizes people and society?

4- Radicalization

There is a pattern that this paper follows in highlighting yet again on the subject of radicalization the inherent bias in the term, that is often used as a euphemism for Islamic radicalization, that has alienated young adults, especially in European countries. While there is no agreed definition of radicalization, the literature tends to depict radicalization as an extreme of beliefs/interpretation and/or practice of a doctrine (Neumann, 2013).

The societal response to radicalization has been a conflict itself. Some governmental efforts have focused on the so-called cultural differences and therefore promoted higher integration as a solution, while others have approached the problem through the perspective of mental healthcare. From the perspective of the far-right politicians, which unfortunately often was seen as becoming part of the mainstream thought, the fault lies with 'immigrants' who need to give up entirely their culture and identity. The inherent racism in this approach is evident. A liberal-democratic society, that is widely promoted by the international community as the appropriate form/model of government, is built on the foundation of being an open society.

Radicalization tends to be portrayed as a steppingstone to terrorism, however, the research is bias in that, this argument is often then connected to religion, as in, there is a higher chance that religious radicalization leads to terrorism rather than political radicalization. Stage theory has been widely used in understanding radicalization. For instance, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko explain that Quintan Wiktorowicz identified four stages, which include: 1) cognitive – using grievances, such as discrimination or 'oppression of Muslims', 2) developing personal relations, 3) legitimate authority – when followers accept a leader as the one with the authority to interpret Islam, and 4) rational choice – which refers to the case when 'risk-taking' by participating in potentially violent activities is justified by the rewards in the aftermath (Wiktorowicz, 2005, quoted in (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017, p. 206). McCauley and Moskalenko hold that the way forward is "recognizing that radicalization to extremist opinions is psychologically a different phenomenon from radicalization to extremist action" (Ibid., p. 211). In this sense, the way radicalization is defined and promoted can become the tipping point for an individual to move from extreme opinions to extreme action. This is referred to as *Radicalization that leads to terrorism*, which OSCE defines as the "dynamic process whereby an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action. This may eventually, but not necessarily, lead this person to advocate, act in support of, or to engage in, terrorism" (OSCE, 2018, p. 7). This brings us to the issue of violent extremism.

5- Violent extremism

One of the main discussions about violent extremism has been if it leads to terrorism. Nowadays, Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) is an umbrella that brings together all efforts of government and think-tanks. Owen Frazer & Christian Nünlist hold that "The concept of CVE was introduced in Europe after the attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005) in response to the fear of homegrown Islamist terrorism. The UK government's Prevent program is regarded as the first practical example of CVE" (Frazer & Nünlist, 2015, p. 2). International actors such as OSCE, have even produced manuals how civil society

can be engaged in P/CVE, as they consider that "Civil society actors are often well-positioned, credible and experienced in working with specific groups to help identify and address the grievances that make individuals more vulnerable to the influence of violent extremist groups" (OSCE, 2018, p. 10). Owen Frazer & Christian Nünlist consider that "CVE or PVE refers to the "soft" side of counterterrorism strategies that tackle the drivers which lead people to engage in politically- or ideologically-motivated violence. In practice, the current focus is on violent Islamist movements, but the term can also be applied to other violent groups, ranging from right-wing or left-wing extremists and environmental activists to Buddhist or Hindu nationalists" (Frazer & Nünlist, 2015, p. 2). The challenge with violent extremism stems from the lack of a unified and agreed definition. In addition to this, as already pointed in other issues, the lack of local ownership to the conceptual and methodological discussions on violent extremism, reduce the role of think-tanks and governments into service-providers or testing grounds for ideas developed far from the reality in the ground. Does this bring us to the next section which considers if terminologies related to radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism are relevant for policymakers and policy design?

II- Is academic research on terminologies related to radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism are relevant for policymakers and policy design?

The problems with lack of agreed definitions of terminologies such as violent extremism, radicalization, terrorism, and foreign fighters, as well as the inherent biases in the way they are defined in the literature, does not reduce the weight of the challenge that they present for an open and democratic society. Violent extremism undermines the values upon which public spaces in democratic societies are built, which include tolerance, inclusion, diversity, freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of the press. In this sense preventing and countering violent extremism, radicalization and terrorism are quintessential tasks that do not belong exclusively to the state institutions but have to be shared with civil society. Leaders of civil society have already committed themselves to be part of the P/CVE efforts, and continue to play an indispensable role. From this context, it serves both the public interest as well as it is in the government's best interest to develop a close partnership with the civil society, first and foremost, in better understanding the violent extremism. Civil society organization have a strong advantage of having access to communities and being seen as more credible actors. However, this cooperation between government and civil society is not effective nor helpful when it is centred on organizations that operate in capitals with limited experience or reach-out to non-urbanized areas. It is essential that communities and grassroots organizations are

involved, respected, and allowed agency. Implementing this approach in practice has been difficult, and part of the problem is trust between the government and civil society, the other is capacity.

Civil society can provide a particular contribution to the conceptual challenges, pertaining to the definition of the terms and creating consensus. As already stated, while the lack of an agreed definition does not reduce the relevance of the challenges, it is nonetheless an important part of the approach in dealing with violent extremism and radicalization. A recent report by the Kosovar think-tank, Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS) found that the way government defines foreign fighters carries practical implications for public policy that is followed on the subject matter (Perteshi & Ilazi, 2020). The report examined how using the term 'foreign fighters' can negatively impact their reintegration in the society, and therefore suggested that they are defined as simply 'returnees' in order to prevent dehumanization as well as marginalization that could potentially inspire them to relapse to terrorism.

There is a perception that the government policies on preventing and countering violent extremism are mainly motivated by the West and therefore inherently are treated with suspicion. Because of this, the way the concepts are defined by the government is very relevant in order to build trust and credibility for their P/CVE measures. As this paper has noted the existing literature, has failed to produce locally owned concepts as an alternative to the dominant Western terminology. This is relevant to support better participation of the community in P/CVE efforts. In this sense, what is effectively recommended is that the government partner with civil society to develop a local framework for terms and concepts that will be utilized by the government in their policies and communication, in order to build more accessibility with the community. But this exercise cannot be reduced into a semantics challenge, it requires a local understanding of the phenomenon. In this context, international actors, including the EU, should support academia and think-tanks to improve their quality of research and support the government with an understanding of the phenomenon that is compatible with the local and cultural context. In other words, terminologies that are currently used in the literature are fundamentally developed to serve the Western governmental apparatus, and therefore carry an implied and inherent bias that is perceived as such by communities that have been directly affected by the phenomenon of violent extremism, radicalization, foreign fighters. Because of the dominant research on terminologies pertaining to violent extremism and radicalization promoted these phenomena as inherently Islamic, the right-wing extremism is entirely ignored as a problem in the Western Balkans. Therefore, research on terminologies can effectively help promote more inclusive public policies that properly tackle factors that contribute to radicalization and violent extremism.

III- Conclusions

Concerning terminologies, it is the case that one size does not fit all. The existing framework of terminology pertaining to violent extremism requires a rethinking that empowers the local context and participation. The underlining assumption of this paper is that the way the concepts pertaining to violent extremism and radicalization are defined matters and has practical policy implications. Accordingly, this paper argued that the existing framework of terminologies was largely developed by Western governments and think-tanks, which carry inherent flaws that fail to recognize the complex and diverse context of societies affected by violent extremism. Because of this, policies design to prevent and counter violent extremism are often efforts to implement technical templates. More locally produced knowledge on the phenomena of violent extremism is a necessity. Local think-tanks have been more of echo-chambers rather than providing a meaningful process for understanding and enhancing local agency in P/CVE. As a result of heavy research of violent extremism, terrorism, radicalization, foreign fighters, and the way these concepts are defined is a euphemism for Muslims and Islam, this is even noted in the very wording of concepts such as 'right-wing extremism', where the term 'right' is added as to make the distinction with the supposedly 'Islamic' extremism, which is the default understanding in this context.

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