Berghof Foundation

Introduction

Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann

www.berghof-handbook.net

Is the topic of violent extremism slowly turning into one on which everything has already been said, but not yet by everyone, as Karl Valentin used to wryly remark? We do not think so. While violent extremism (VE) has indeed emerged as a new buzzword and a strong funding trend over the past few years, effective strategies for addressing the phenomenon are still being forged and need to be reviewed and tested. Violent extremism's manifestations range widely: from foreign fighters via terrorist attacks to increasingly public violence-condoning ideology and rhetoric of both secular and religious provenance. How to deal with violent extremism, and its protagonists, is therefore also becoming a major challenge for peacebuilders and conflict transformation practitioners. What specific advantages can a "transformative lens" bring – one which applies insights and learning from the peacebuilding and conflict transformation fields? This is one of the main areas of investigation of this latest issue of the Berghof Handbook Dialogues.

In detail, we set out to find responses to the following questions:

- What evidence-based knowledge is there in academia, practitioner and policy circles on the causes and effects of current radicalisation leading to or expressing itself in violent extremism?
- What are the links between violent ideology, religious *or* secular, and political action? Despite the prominence that the discussion of radical Islam currently enjoys in this context, our Dialogue aims to shed light on *all* relevant and diverse forms of radicalisation and extremism.
- Which avenues of influence – on which types of actor, at which levels, in which sectors – are particularly promising from a conflict transformation and peacebuilding perspective? Who needs to be involved? How can transformative strategies be formulated which actively contribute to changing and de-escalating extreme and violent practices and strategies, or which prevent their emergence in the first place?

Our aim with this 13th issue of the Berghof Handbook Dialogues is to pull together recent analysis, practice and policy experience into one dialogue, upon which a further discussion about regional commonalities and differences, and experiences from research, practice and policy can build.

‹http://image.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Handbook/Dialogue_Chapters/dialogue13_violentextremism_editors_intro.pdf›. First launch 10/01/2018.

The current state of debate: a lack of unified understanding

The rise, both real and perceived, of violent extremism, armed radicalisation and terrorist activity challenges the field of peace and conflict studies alongside other areas of study and practice (politics, security, development). For all of them, it poses an urgent need to gain a better understanding of the actors, factors and dynamics at play. This starts, however, with acknowledging that no unified or even very explicit understanding exists of how to define the phenomena of violent extremism, armed radicalisation and terrorist activity.

As regards violent extremism, one of the authors in this Dialogue, Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, puts her finger on it: "despite the myriad policy directives and action plans to prevent and counter this phenomenon, there is still no agreed definition of what 'violent extremism' means" (in this volume, 22). One of the few exceptions to this is the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which defines violent extremism as "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives" (USAID 2011, 2-3). This definition is also used by the lead author in this Dialogue, Mohammed Abu-Nimer (in this volume, 2).[1] If extremism as such implies a deviation from mainstream social norms, then violent extremism entails the use of all means, including brutal force, that seem to serve the extremists' aim of pushing the mainstream within society towards extremist thought and belief as the dominant social norm.

A similar lacuna relates to the terminology surrounding radicalisation (and its non-mirror image, de-radicalisation), which has now become near-synonymous with violence-prone processes. As Allen has noted: "No universal definition of radicalization exists in the [...] academic/social science communities." In his words, "the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence as a method to effect societal change" results in the radicalisation of social groups (Allen 2007, 3). However, he does not present a single convincing argument for an intrinsic combination of radicalism and violence. Waldmann describes a "radical" as someone who "does not make compromises but tries to resolve problems once [and] for all by tackling them at their roots ... questions the status quo of the socio-political order with a view to replacing it with another ... [and] will often act in the name of an absolute truth, be it an ideology or a religion, which does not admit concessions or restrictions" (Waldmann 2010, 8). Researchers from the Western Balkans, who have contributed to this Dialogue issue, apply a broader definition and rightly point out that at its root, radicalism simply means that one does not agree with the majority (in this volume, 73f). Uncoupled from violence, then, radical ideas can also be seen as motors of necessary and fruitful change. It is not without irony that one of the founding fathers of peacebuilding, Adam Curle, has been called a "radical peacemaker" (Woodhouse 2010).

And terrorist activity? After 9/11, terrorism has become a widely used, common term to characterise the apparently random but targeted use of force to intimidate a government, a religious or ethnic community or other social groups. While the selection of individual victims seems to be random, those victims are assumed by the perpetrators to represent the actor or community that is targeted.

Whereas radicalisation describes a process during which individuals or groups lean increasingly to extremist thoughts and belief, extremism implies the readiness to use force in order to achieve political (or other) objectives. Terrorist activity, however, refers to a terminology that brands actors for their intended or actual use of force. This practice of branding results in often reductionist policies, which may deepen a public sense of identity-based hostility and isolation, no matter what the motivation of individual perpetrators may have been. In sum, the direct link between (armed) radicalisation, (violent) extremism, and terrorist activity, very often to be observed in politics and media, seems to be constructed and blurs the lines between legitimate grievances and resistance on the one hand – and the illegal and illegitimate use of force on the other.

1 Still, sceptical voices persist: "Violent extremism is really when a particular ideology, deemed 'radical' or 'extreme' is used to promote, incite or condone violent behaviour. But why not just call it 'violence' then?", argues one interviewee in "Lost for Words: Questioning the Relationship between Trauma and Radicalisation", Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, 15 September 2017.

Despite this lack of shared understanding or definition of the core problem(s), Preventing or Countering Violent Extremism (PVE/CVE) has become a focal point of discussion, research and programming around the world.

There have been numerous attempts to classify the various root causes and driving factors of violent extremism according to their level of analysis (micro/meso/macro), their unit of analysis (individual/group/societal) or distinct sectoral approaches (socio-economic/political/cultural/psychological) (for an exhaustive overview, see Köhler 2016). The most common classification has become the distinction between "push" and "pull" factors of violent extremism. In this context, "push" commonly refers to structural conditions, such as poverty, grievances and lack of access to political processes or justice, often in the context of underdevelopment or protracted conflict. "Pull" factors are commonly understood as the direct drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (see, e.g., Holmer 2013), such as the ideological appeal or financial and social benefits of joining a terrorist group (e.g. feeling of belonging, in-group identity or more practical benefits such as finding a spouse).

The 2015 UN Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism (UN 2015) also identified clusters of push and pull factors. The "push factors" named include conditions conducive to violent extremism and the structural context from which it emerges, such as lack of socio-economic opportunities; marginalisation and discrimination; poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law; prolonged and unresolved conflicts; and radicalisation in prisons. "Pull factors" comprise the individual motivations and processes which play a key role in transforming ideas and grievances into violent extremist action. They include: individual backgrounds and motivations; collective grievances and victimisation stemming from domination, oppression, subjugation or foreign intervention; distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies and ethnic and cultural differences; and leadership and social networks. In reality, there is no either/or. Push and pull factors are interwoven and mutually reinforcing.

In public debate and programming, however, arguments about the causes of and policies for addressing violent extremism and radicalisation appear to be based less on thorough, up-to-date analysis and differentiated assessment (for a critique, see, for example, Kundnani 2015) and more on stereotyping and fear. It is not surprising, in this context, that the topic of violent extremism – albeit an issue which has assumed various guises for centuries – gained renewed prominence after the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001. 9/11 was a watershed in the sense that from that point on, the predominant Western political and public perspective seemed to intrinsically intertwine the phenomena of fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism. The global research agenda, however, is more varied than often perceived, or portrayed in the media.

Before 9/11, the academic discourse around violent extremism and radicalisation was mainly concerned with far-right and extremist left-wing actors in Europe and the Middle East. Individuals were considered to be drawn to violent extremism for reasons such as the rejection of cultural imperialism, the free market economy and corruption, political illegitimacy, colonialist structures and extreme wealth disparities. During the early 2000s, research into the nexus between religion and violent extremism grew. Nonetheless, structural causes of radicalisation towards violent extremism, such as repression or economic conditions (relative deprivation, poverty and globalisation), also remained on the research agenda. Researchers explored possible links between violent extremism and the degree of democracy, education and governance (one recent example evidenced by UNDP 2017) as well as drivers such as honour and oppression. A noticeable shift towards social factors occurred during these years, prompting researchers to focus on the role of civil society, gender or identity formation. The research field took steps to distance itself from attributing violent extremism to religious beliefs, despite persistent pockets of hot debate about this connection.[2]

2 This is starkly captured by the debate between French philosophers Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel, which contrasts the "Islamicization of radicalism" (Olivier Roy) with a "Radicalization of Islam" (Gilles Kepel); see Adam Nossiter, "'That ignoramus': 2 French Scholars of Radical Islam Turn Bitter Rivals", New York Times, 12 July 2016.

Today's research agenda on violent extremism is concerned more particularly with youth radicalisation patterns, highlighting the lack of social inclusion. Identity is also examined as a driving force at the micro level (SFCG 2017). Alongside these more recent topics, other more traditional factors which are suspected to be root causes of violent extremism, such as blocked political and economic participation, are also being investigated. Finally, and ground-breaking, if extremism becomes increasingly popular and mainstreamed within a particular society, common assumptions about this society, i.e. its centre-periphery constructions, may become fissured, which tends to enlarge the body of research from a focus on particular groups and actors to the more fundamental issues of the social fabric and political values of the given society.

Overall, the contemporary body of research is characterised by specialised literature in a range of fields, such as criminology, security, terrorism, social psychology, conflict and development studies. There is little interaction between these fields of enquiry, which leaves little space for a common understanding to emerge over the main push and pull factors of violent extremism. There are growing calls, therefore, for more cross-disciplinary debate. Furthermore, since violent extremism can be considered an increasingly global phenomenon, the need for case-specific and comparative research on the topic is growing, particularly focusing on Europe (for example, Germany, France, Belgium and the UK), the MENA region, Asia (i.e. the Philippines, Indonesia and Central Asia) and Western Balkan countries.

On terminology

For the purpose of this dialogue, we understand violent extremism generally as violence associated with radical ideologies or groups which strive for a complete, not gradual or incremental, change of political and social relations. We concede that the boundaries between extremism and violence are sometimes permeable and event-driven. And we bear in mind that although violence and extremism are not bound to one specific religious or ideological setting, discussions of the concept are usually associated with a very specific empirical reality, i.e. violence conducted by individuals or groups associated with Al Qaeda and ISIS or right-wing extremism associated with white supremacist ideology in the US or Europe. Concerning the various approaches for dealing with the phenomenon, we offer the following "understandings in progress", which inform our interest in the topic. Although the different concepts in and of themselves still lack theoretical, definitional and operational coherence and clarity, it is useful to keep in mind the distinctions between them:

Countering violent extremism (or CVE) was initially a rather cosmetic improvement on the increasingly criticised anti-/counter-terrorism approaches, which rely on intelligence-gathering and a suppressive repertoire. CVE has now developed into a security-focused approach to dealing with VE which uses a myriad of tools and entry points, but remains rooted in a hard power approach.

Preventing violent extremism (PVE) was first introduced in the 2015 UN Action Plan presented by then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (UN 2015). Emphasis is put on identifying and tackling the push and pull factors, on addressing structural root causes and on strengthening individual and community resilience.

The recent introduction of *Transforming Violent Extremism (TVE)* underscores the necessity and the possibility of changing actors, and their means of violence, rather than solely stepping up security or resilience in order to protect and prevent: "*Transforming* violent extremism recognizes that while violent extremism exists, the reasons and motivators leading to an individual being drawn to violent extremist movements can be transformed into a different type of agency or engagement. This is distinct from *countering* violent extremism which is reactive to extremist violence rather than aimed at altering the dynamics that motivate it." (SFCG 2017, 4). Similar terminology is also taken as the framing concept in this dialogue ("Transformative Approaches to VE"), where lead author Mohammed Abu-Nimer proposes: "What is truly needed to effectively address VE is the development of … programmes that take into account the 'human factors' – the community context, culture and religion, building trust with the community, fostering intra-

community relationships through dialogue, finding a language of peace and peace education, etc." (in this volume, 3).

With all approaches, there remains a major blind spot in terms of policy options for engaging groups that are already/still radicalised, as there are no existing approaches for 'engaging violent extremists' (or 'EVE') through third-party dialogue or negotiation. However, if third parties play a significant role in the radicalisation processes of social and political actors – a hypothesis which is widely acknowledged as a reference point for those actors – then the role of third parties in supporting reconciliation and peace processes must be equally important. An explorative idea at this stage, EVE denotes a stance that attempts to analyse root causes and options for change not in academic, securitised or Western "silos", but *together with* affected communities and radicalised groups themselves. More particularly, such a term implies that dialogue engagement with radicalised groups and individuals might be a viable option if it is conducted with the aim of reducing violence or paving the way for a peace process. However, there is currently a severe lack of comprehensive and in-depth research to inform policy approaches and decision-making in this area.

Contributions to this dialogue

The lead article in this dialogue comes from **Mohammed Abu-Nimer**, a Senior Advisor to KAICIID (International Dialogue Centre, Vienna, Austria) and Professor at the American University School of International Service, International Peace and Conflict Resolution Program. His article critically examines the emerging CVE/PVE field, addressing two interlinked core questions: how do various CVE/PVE approaches relate to current issues of violent extremism (VE) in Muslim communities, and what are the areas of intersection between interreligious peacebuilding and the various CVE/PVE approaches? Abu-Nimer unpacks assumptions and functions that CVE/PVE fulfil in the current crisis facing many Muslim and non-Muslim governments around the world, especially in Europe and North America. He stresses that since "countering Islamic" terrorism and VE constitute the core of CVE/PVE approaches (based on the misperception and assumption that Muslims are disproportionately responsible for acts of violence), it is necessary to explore whether this is the most effective method. In search of alternative approaches, the article explores several examples of Islamic peace models in building stronger resilience in Muslim communities and institutions to VE. He also calls for a stronger and more sincere engagement with religious institutions, better "religious literacy" among secular NGO and government workers and a better grounding in the theoretical understandings and principled approaches inherent in a "culture of peace".

The first response to this lead article comes from **Sanam Naraghi Anderlini**, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the International Civil Society Action Network ICAN, spearheading the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) with member organisations active in preventing violent extremism by promoting peace, rights and pluralism in over 35 countries. In responding to Abu-Nimer's framing article, her paper offers "points of agreement and difference in an effort to deepen our collective understanding of the phenomenon of violent extremism and the responses needed to enable effective transformation" (in this volume, 23). It does so in two ways: first, by offering a conceptual shift to move beyond limitations of the current terminology and discourse; and, second, by arguing the relevance of identity with particular attention to the centrality of gender to the ideology, recruitment and action of violent extremists, as well as the importance of women in particular in countering, preventing and providing clear alternatives to such groups.

The second response comes from **Maral Jekta**, a Research Associate with the Berlin-based organisation ufuq e.V., who has a strong focus on and background in media and strategic communication and the role of narratives in counter-messaging. Jekta's response to the lead article discusses Abu-Nimer's suggestion to engage more seriously with religious agencies and actors, using Iraq as an example. She examines in particular the way in which religion and its identity components are being integrated in INGOs' project

structures in Iraq and highlights the limitations of this approach. In this context, Jekta argues that the emphasis on de-linking religion from the CVE/PVE debate and focusing more on root-cause analyses (Abu-Nimer in this volume, PAGE) is much-needed. Unlike Abu-Nimer, however, she emphasises the need to engage with *secular* organisations and movements. In a second step, this response underlines many of the deficiencies of CVE/PVE approaches which Abu-Nimer lists, by presenting their negative impact on international media development practitioners. Lastly, Jekta refers to the German federal programme "Live Democracy!" to support the call for a holistic "idealism" approach in PVE.

The third response comes from **Anita Ernstorfer**, Director at the US-based CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. She leads CDA's Peacebuilding Effectiveness Practice Area as well as CDA's Advisory Services wing. Her article focuses on the question of what makes prevention of violent extremism approaches effective. It explores in more detail some of the points raised in the lead article related to an insufficient understanding of structural drivers of violent extremism (VE), the limited evidence base and research in relation to the 'prevention' or 'countering' of violent extremism (P/CVE), unrealistic donor expectations, and weak and externally imposed programme designs. It specifically responds to Abu-Nimer's request to "delve deeper" into analysing structures of violence, not only the symptoms (Abu-Nimer in this volume, 17). The article takes a practical approach, based on the premise that political extremism and rapidly changing forms of violence have been a concern in the peacebuilding field for a long time and that we need to understand the phenomenon of 'violent extremism' alongside other forms of violence. In any case, Ernstorfer argues, significant levels of policy attention and funding will be focused on P/CVE programming for the foreseeable future, so it is wise to work towards maximising the potential for positive peace impacts of different approaches to preventing violent extremism by applying principles from the peacebuilding field and a systems perspective.

The fourth respondent is Radwan **El Sayed**, Professor of Islamic Studies at Lebanese University in Beirut, who also "digs deeper", in his case into the question of what religious institutions can really do, what they are currently undertaking and how they could be strengthened in their endeavours. He applies a long historical view and reflects on how the securitisation of C/PVE has affected the relationship between religious institutions and their constituencies, stressing the need to rebuild the trust among them and follow the principle of inclusivity. He concurs with Abu-Nimer on the worrisome lack of clear long-term strategies and tool kits that help religious institutions take part in C/PVE programmes effectively without threatening their credibility with their constituencies, pointing to the necessity of empowering the religious institutions to develop tools and frameworks that use the language of faith and reflect the spiritual and religious traditions in a way that resonates in the modern age. He identifies steps of rehabilitation, qualification and dialogue as necessary avenues ahead.

The final response comes in the form of an **interview with a consortium of local researchers from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Kosovo**. All are part of a collaborative and participatory research project currently implemented by Berghof Foundation's Conflict Transformation Research programme.[3] In a conversation recorded in Sarajevo in March 2018, the experts from the region shared many areas of agreement with the propositions put forward in the lead article. In particular, the need to start by assessing the needs of the local communities meant to be strengthened by national strategies to counter or prevent violent extremism and the imperative to work with the Islamic community and especially local imams in the municipalities in question resonated strongly for the region of the Western Balkans. At the same time, there was lively debate that it would be wrong to put all the burden on the shoulders of the Islamic community, neglecting the national and global dimensions of the problem or romanticising the homogeneity and clout of the institutions at hand. The conversation then turned to the need to carefully examine the terminology used in programme writing and implementation ("'Islamic' anything", it is pointed out, "that's the wrong term"; in this volume, 74). A dynamic concept of "reciprocal" or "cumulative" extremism is introduced and

3 For more information on the project "Opportunities for Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) in the Western Balkans", see https://www.berghof-foundation.org/nc/en/programmes/conflict-transformation-research/western-balkans-preventing-violent-extremism/

the team of researchers agrees that "...this article's contribution, and our own, could be to start a discussion about re-inventing the terms used in preparing and making policies in PVE and CVE" (in this volume, 75).

In his final reflection on the responses in this Dialogue issue, Mohammed Abu-Nimer reiterates the importance of integrating religious actors and interreligious peacebuilding. At the same time, he emphasises the need for complementarity: "without a complementary approach based on systematic cooperation and coordination between the various abovementioned agencies that contribute to the causes of violence, formal and informal interventions to counter violent extremism will continue to provide limited remedy and only handle symptoms at best." (in this volume, 77). He therefore calls for interreligious peacebuilding to become a truly collaborative effort and points to the need for "sustained dialogue platforms designed specifically to identify common issues for collaboration and develop a sense of genuine respect for ideological and identity-based differences" (in this volume, 79).

Prominent themes and dilemmas

The dialogue at hand, as is usual with the exchanges hosted by this publication series, is rich in detail and differentiation. Nonetheless, there are a few themes which emerge across the lead article and the responses, and they are worth highlighting at the end of this introduction. We pick two, which we see as particularly relevant, also against the backdrop of our understanding of conflict transformation (Berghof Foundation 2012, 7ff).

The need for education, learning and reflection ... at all levels. It has become clear, if it needed to be any clearer, from the contributions to this volume that the dynamics of radicalisation and violent extremism, the wording around the issue and case- and context-specific factors of what can be done are still not sufficiently understood. More dialogue and evidence-based comparative learning will be necessary. However, a different type of education also comes to the forefront, and that is the education of a resilient next generation, which early on is being equipped to see through the dubious promises of violent extremist ideologies. Of course, change is not merely a cognitive challenge. If radicalisation is rooted in social hardships and political grievances, education will make a difference only if it enables the affected people to mitigate tensions and enter into constructive engagement with each other to foster social changes.

The needs of inclusivity ... for religious institutions and more. The need for more respectful engagement with religious actors and institutions has generally been supported by the contributors to this dialogue. However, they also underline that it is important to cast the net of inclusivity more widely still, and build effective strategies for countering violent extremism on a broad base of religious and secular actors. Most importantly, the dialogue must not be confined to the relationship between different religious communities. It must start within the communities, focusing on shared values, social cohesion, principles of non-violence, minority rights, gender equality, and more. Naraghi Anderlini speaks for several of our respondents when she states: "Too often, religious institutions – even the more moderate ones – are at odds with principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. Thus, while their inclusion in P/CVE efforts is essential and in many cases is occurring at the grassroots, their legitimacy or authority should not be elevated above those of women- or youth-led organisations and others active in this sphere." (in this volume, 23).

Conclusion

The violence-condoning ideologies and terrorising violence of the few should never make us forget the openness and non-violence of many. But it is undisputable that confronting violent extremism has become a central framework and priority, especially for policy-makers in national and international government agencies. The fertile ground for violent extremism appears to be growing, augmented by a number of drivers, both internal and external. Still, it is a problematic term: easily applied against communities rather than with the aim of understanding root causes of violence. It often gets lost in the current political debates which seek to clarify distinctions, be it between violent extremism and other forms of violence, political or social, or between violent and non-violent extremism.

At Berghof Foundation, we are primarily concerned with two issues: first, an open-minded and better understanding of the drivers of violent extremism; and second, supporting work promoting tolerance and inclusivity. We hope that this Berghof Handbook Dialogue 13 gives us a better start in achieving both, and thank all those who have made this frank exchange possible and who have contributed to its timely publication.

References

Allen, Charles E. (2007). Threat of Islamic Radicalissation to the Homeland. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 14 March 2007. Washington, DC.

Berghof Foundation (ed.) (2012). Berghof Glossary on Conflict Transformation. – 20 Notions for Theory and Practice. Berlin.

Holmer, Georgia (2013). Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective. Special Report 336. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.

Köhler, Daniel (2017). Understanding De-radicalization:. Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism. London/NewYork: Routledge.

Kundnani, Arun (2015). A Decade Lost: Rethinking Radicalisation and Extremism. London: Claystone.

Search for Common Ground (2017). Transforming Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilder's Guide. Washington, DC: SFCG.

UN (2015). Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. A/70/674. New York: UN.

UNDP (2017). Journey to Extremism in Africa. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

USAID (2011). The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency: Putting Principles into Practice. Washington, DC: USAID.

Waldmann, Peter K. (2010). Radicalisation in the Diaspora: Why Muslims in the West Attack their Host Countries. Working Paper 9. Madrid: Elcano Royal Institute.

Woodhouse, Tom and John Paul Lederach (2016). Adam Curle: Radical Peacemaker. Stroud: Hawthorne Press.