Understanding the Violent and Non-Violent Extremism Grey Zone

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March 2019
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www.trendsinstitution.org
March 2019
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Introduction

Confronting ‘non-violent extremism’ has become a priority for policy makers in both Western and Muslim-majority countries. But the term has also been politically controversial, with suggestions that it is inherently discriminatory, and polices thought and free speech. This paper explores the development of the concept of ‘non-violent extremism’ within a policy context, drawing particularly on the example of the UK; it uses data-driven research to explore the complex relationship between violent and non-violent extremism; and explores the implications of this understanding for efforts to respond to extremist violence. This paper largely focuses on the debate around Islamist extremism, but also has implications for other forms of ideological extremism which have both a violent and non-violent component, including the Far Right.

Political Context

After the 9/11 attacks shook the world and demonstrated the potential destructive power and global reach of violent extremism, huge investment was made in an international programme of counter terrorism measures, in an effort to safeguard populations against non-state actors determined to pursue indiscriminate violence for political ends.¹

However, one of the major developments in the last decade has been the increase in efforts to counter extremism, with interventions that operate increasingly upstream, focusing on addressing the conditions, vulnerabilities and mindset that might make a person resort to extremist violence, rather than simply preventing the violence itself. A growing part of this policy shift has been an emphasis on tackling so-called ‘non-violent extremism’, and attempts to address the kinds of ideologies that are perceived to legitimise and drive terrorism ‘upstream,’ before they manifest violently.

In the West, the UK has led the way in identifying extremist ideology as a driver of violence. ‘Prevent’, strategy, a pillar of its ‘Contest’ counter-terrorism strategy, was the first public programme in the world to codify a government role in delivering early interventions to prevent individuals from becoming violent extremists. In 2006, a year after the 7/7 attacks left 52 dead in London, the UK government began to focus its Prevent strategy on the ideological aspects of extremism, increasing its emphasis on the problems of “non-violent” as well as “violent” extremism. As Martyn Frampton notes in his history of the Muslim Brotherhood and the West, this added pressure to those “formerly described as “moderate” Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood.”² A narrative often promulgated by Muslim Brotherhood-linked outfits was that their brand of political Islamism is a bulwark, or firewall, against the violent Salafi-jihadi extremism of groups such as al-Qaeda.³
Accusations had been levelled against Prevent that funding had been channelled to groups harbouring extremist ideologies, and that the government had been inadvertently engaging with, and therefore legitimising, non-violent extremists in its efforts to counter terrorism. Future iterations of the strategy therefore made explicit that “neither Government Departments nor the police will rely on extremists to address the risk of radicalisation”.

This policy shift was further formalised in the 2011 review of the Prevent strategy, which explicitly stipulated that “preventing terrorism will mean challenging extremist (and non-violent) ideas that are also part of a terrorist ideology,” as well as claiming that “terrorist groups of all kinds very often draw upon ideologies which have been developed, disseminated and popularised by extremist organisations that appear to be non-violent (such as groups which neither use violence nor specifically and openly endorse its use by others),” referring to both Islamist and extreme right-wing terrorism. The recently launched 2018 new counter-terrorism strategy affirmed that “the Prevent strategy will remain a vital part of our counter-terrorism work.”

In other Western countries, this shift towards framing the counter-extremism debate around destructive ideologies rather than just behaviour has been slower. The United States has focussed largely on counter-terrorism, but is developing an increasing onus on prevention. However, the First Amendment of the US Constitution has made discussions around distinguishing between mainstream and extremist religious ideologies in the public sphere difficult. For similar reasons, France’s culture of Laïcité-style secularism means government does not engage at all in the plane of religion or belief besides a robust emphasis on 'republican values’. Meanwhile, while deep tensions between host and immigrant communities in urban centres, has created an adversarial climate that makes discussions around mainstream, moderate and extremist world views difficult. Other countries, such as Italy, have historically adopted more repressive means of countering violent extremism, often through the deportation of extremist ideologues and paramilitary policing, due to their own unique history of confronting terrorism during the 20th century.

However, the principles behind tackling extremist ideologies rather than terrorist violence are being globalised. The UK Prevent Strategy is held up as an international model, delegations from overseas are presented with lessons learned from the programme, and it was recently recommended by Europol’s chief as ‘best practice’ for EU member states. But it also used as a cautionary tale for the importance of effectively communicating efforts to tackle extremist ideologies, to avoid the perception of government spying or demonising minority communities, or engaging in ‘thought policing’. In particular, the importance of strategic communications between government and communities is emphasised, with the Home Office’s Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) stressing the importance of counter-extremism efforts being grassroots led, rather than government fronted.
Policies aimed at tackling terrorism by countering extremist ideologies are premised on a relationship between violent and non-violent extremism. But what does the evidence tell us about the connection between these distinct, but interrelated phenomena? In the following section, I analyse data gathered on the pathways to extremist violence, the theological and conceptual overlap between non-violent and violent extremist propaganda, and the relationship between extremist and terrorist content online. This will explore the evidence base between the controversial duelling theories that non-violent extremist thought serves as a ‘conveyor belt’ to extremist violence or that political extremism can serve as an effective bulwark against violent extremism.9

**Two sides of the same coin? Comparing violent and non-violent extremist ideology**

In his 2014 paper, ‘Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?’, Alex Schmid addresses the conceptual complexity of non-violent Islamist extremism.10 One key question in this debate concerns the extent of ideological overlap between examples of violent and non-violent extremism. Is the difference between non-violent Islamist simply tactical (i.e. a calculated choice about the utility of violence vs. political engagement for achieving the same ends), or are there distinct worldviews underpinning these positions? This is a difficult question to answer but the answer has profound implications for strategies for addressing different forms of extremism.

Some researchers have addressed this qualitatively based on specific ideological elements. For example, Emily Dyer explored the overlap of ISIS and al-Qaeda views on women and gender with non-violent extremist groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir.11 Although there are significant variations between the groups’ positions regarding women’s roles in society, Dyer suggests much of this variance is due to ISIS’ declaration of a Caliphate, and belief in the establishment of an idealised Islamic state by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi June 2014, while Hizb-ut-Tahrir believes that the Caliphate is yet to have been established, finding that “HT’s theoretical position is broadly mirrored within IS’ propaganda and practice.”12

But while such efforts provide useful insight into the overlap between violent and non-violent extremism, it only reflects a small number of groups across a limited aspect of ideology. To draw out broader conclusions, it is necessary to adopt a big data approach, drawing on ideological material from numerous groups across the non-violent / violent Islamist spectrum, and moving beyond just qualitative analysis.

My 2017 research ‘Struggle Over Scripture’ with Rachel Bryson, worked to build evidence on this by using an experimental methodology incorporating natural language processing technology, to paint a quantitative picture of the key ideological differences between non-violent political Islamist extremism, Salafi-jihadism and the Islamic mainstream. Using natural language processing allowed for the analysis of over 3,000 texts from a range of groups - including the Muslim Brotherhood, Jemaat-i-Islami, Hizb-
ut-Tahrir, ISIS, al-Qaeda - as well as mainstream fatwas and counter-narrative texts - drawing out salient ideological concepts as well as their recourse to religious scripture and scholarship.\textsuperscript{13}

The most significant finding to highlight was the ideological gulf between Islamism and mainstream Islam, undermining the claim of extremists - both Islamist and anti-Muslim - that seek to conflate a world religion of 1.6 billion practitioners, and a fringe the political ideology. For example, while only eight percent of the 50 most quoted Quranic verses in Salafi-jihadi material were prevalent in mainstream texts. And while 86 percent of Salafi-jihadis’ main conceptual references were extreme in their interpretation, only seven percent of mainstream key themes prevalent in mainstream religious texts had the potential to be interpreted through a violent lens.\textsuperscript{14}

But the data is also instructive about the ideological overlap between non-violent Islamism and Salafi-jihadism. If you analyse the over 26,000 references to religious scripture across the document sample, you find a close proximity in their recourse to Quranic quotations - both cherry pick verses that affirm their narrow politicised vision of Islam. There is striking overlap when you compare the most quoted Quranic verses across Salafi-jihadi and Islamist texts. Of the top 10 verses drawn on by ideologues from both these ideological categories, 6 are in common. The same is true if analysis is expanded to include the top 50 verses in these texts, almost two-thirds of the most quoted verses in Salafi-jihadi documents feature also in the Islamist results. In other words, violent and non-violent use of scripture is remarkably similar.
Meanwhile, natural language processing software also allows for analysis of the relative use of religious concepts across different types of documents, allowing for direct comparison of the arsenal of ideas deployed across distinct categories of content. Notably, when it comes to shared concepts the similarity between Islamist and Salafi-jihadi content is even higher than their scriptural commonality, at 70 percent overlap. Jihad, an Islamic state or caliphate, and concern with polytheism and the status of non-Muslims are conceptual priorities held in common by violent and non-violent extremists.

However, despite this overlap, the specific ideological distinctions are telling, and instructive for understanding the relationship between these worldviews. While Islamists’ choices of Quranic quotations are notable for their thematic similarity with the Salafi-jihadi texts analysed, they are generally framed in a less violent manner. Although they do not necessarily invoke religious violence, the most common verses cited by Islamists legitimise a binary worldview similar to that of violent extremists and promote practices that enforce discrimination against non-Muslims, including the implementation of the jizya (a tax on ‘people of the book’ such as Jews and Christians). Conceptually, Islamists put a greater focus on worship than Salafi-jihadis, but also stress Sharia law over their violent extremist cousins. Such themes are largely absent from mainstream sources.

While the interplay between the categories of Islamist and Salafi-jihadi ideology can be hard to delineate, such research shows a significant relationship that deserves further investigation. But discussing extremism purely through the lens of ideas can seem rather abstract and detached from the complex psycho-social processes of radicalisation, where the significance of ideology can vary drastically from case to case.

**Individual Pathways from Non-violent to Violent Extremism**

The ‘conveyor belt’ theory of radicalisation which claims that extremist ideas lead “progressively and linearly to violence” has been widely discredited, while UK Government research in the UK has consistently indicated that there is no single socio-demographic profile of a terrorist. Individuals who have joined Salafi-jihadi groups overseas or have faced arrest for (attempted and successful) acts of terrorism have diverse socio-economic backgrounds, religious upbringings, and a range of educational levels. But research does nonetheless reveal insight about the prevalence of non-violent Islamist backgrounds among violent extremists.

Across two research projects, the Tony Blair Institute quantitatively surveyed the profiles of over 200 jihadi figures from across the Middle East and Africa, and from the United Kingdom. Across the Middle East and Africa, 51 percent of militants profiled were found to have non-violent Islamist links before joining violent movements. Half of these had connections to the Muslim Brotherhood or affiliated organisations. For the UK data set this number rose significantly. Seventy seven per cent of people in our UK sample of violent extremists had prior links to non-violent Islamism, either through connections
to political Islamist groups or close relationships to non-violent Islamist ideologues (such as the hate preacher Anjem Choudary, the co-founder of Islamist organisation al-Muhajiroun, who was recently released from prison after a failed defence claiming he was supporting the establishment of an Islamic state, rather than the Islamic State). Former Prime Minister David Cameron remarked on this trend during a 2011 speech in Munich, where he said, “Many of them [those convicted of terrorist offences] were initially influenced by what some have called ‘nonviolent extremists’, and they then took those radical beliefs to the next level by embracing violence.”

The numerical discrepancy in a personal history of non-violent extremism between data collected for Salafi-jihadi figures from the Middle East and Africa, and those from the United Kingdom, may reflect different profiles and pathways, or might rather be symptomatic of different approaches to press reporting on the routes to radicalisation of individuals. Some jihadi groups have even undergone a similar transformation, starting life as non-violent Islamist movements. In Somalia, the Islamic Courts Union which emerged in Mogadishu in 1994 in response to the crumbling state apparatus in the country, sought to apply an interpretation of Islamic law through non-violent methods, but its youth wing went on to form the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab in 2006. Meanwhile, Boko Haram started out as a non-violent movement to establish an Islamic state in northern Nigeria. Rising tensions with Abuja led to a violent insurgency which spread across the Lake Chad region, and in 2015 it pledged allegiance to ISIS. As is the case with individuals, such transitions do not indicate an inevitable causal relationship - there are many Islamist groups that have remained non-violent - but they do show the potential for sublimation between political extremism and militancy, particularly in conflict zones.

A 2010 report from the think tank Demos makes this distinction in another way, by comparing the ideological attitudes of Islamist ‘terrorists’ and ‘radicals’, finding them to be subtly distinct. Findings included the fact that terrorists in their sample had a “simpler, shallower conception of Islam than radicals”, while radicals were more likely than terrorists to have been involved in political protest, suggesting that an outlet for political grievance may serve as a potential curb on extremist violence. This chimes with data from Somalia suggesting that while education provision can serve to increase support for political violence, providing civic engagement opportunities and action campaigns can see participation in and support for violence drop significantly, by up to 20 percent.

According to Demos, radicalisation to violence is not always a natural or linear progression from being a radical, but a number of ‘signs’ might indicate proximity to a tipping point for violence, including “clashes with existing mosque authorities, debates between ‘do-ers’ and ‘talkers’, deep engagement in literature that explains how to determine a kafir and what is permissible once you know, and any criminal activity undertaken in this respect.” There is a growing body of literature on these so-called ‘tipping points’ which trigger certain individuals to take the step of joining a violent extremist group where others in a similar circumstance might not. Exploring both push and pull factors in this vein
allows for more nuanced policy making that goes beyond simplistic theories that present factors such as ‘poverty’, ‘foreign policy’, ‘lack of education’, or ‘religion’ as the ‘root causes’ of violent extremism. Processes are highly individualised, and someone might become a violent extremist from seemingly unlikely circumstances. However, a history of non-violent extremism is undeniably a prominent commonality across cases.

The Online Dimension

As tech companies come under increasing pressure to regulate the online space, a greater focus of policy and academic discussion around extremism in both its violent and non-violent forms relate to extremism’s online dimensions. Inevitably, such debates around the ambiguous relationship between Islamism and Salafi-jihadism translate into questions about the acceptability of certain types of content. Online, it is especially difficult to distinguish between violent and non-violent extremism, unless content contains direct incitement or representations of violence. The current designation of extremist content may be able to identify unambiguous images and videos, but may not necessarily pick up on the wealth of extremist publications and lectures that are accessible online which are more difficult to identify as being extreme.

Content from designated terrorist organisations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda is largely kept away from search results pages and social media feeds, including through ‘hashing’ technology developed by - and shared between - the largest tech companies Google, Twitter, Microsoft, and Facebook. But there remains a problem with the prevalence of extremist content online, that is not explicitly terroristic in nature. For example, content from Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the international pro-Caliphate organisation, dominates online search results for keywords including ‘Khilafah’ (the Arabic for Caliphate), despite sharing views about the necessity of an Islamic state with ISIS.

Due to the difficulty in governing the online space, the internet provides additional immunity - while there is no registered entity as Hizb-ut-Tahrir in the UK due to its extremist views, the group nonetheless has an ‘official’ website. Similar dynamics can be seen in the case of the Far Right. The white supremacist portal Stormfront, which includes holocaust denial, racism and virulent anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and described as “the first major hate site on the Internet”, has been taken offline numerous times due to complaints about its content before resurfacing under a new domain. The site still remains online at the time of writing.

Tech companies are beginning to recognise that a ‘whack-a-mole’ approach is unsustainable as a method for tackling extremist use of the online space. Google’s Redirect Method attempts to challenge online radicalisation by displacing extremist content with alternative narratives in the form of YouTube
videos. But navigating the complex ideological spectrum that spans from terrorist to extremist to mainstream content requires a nuanced ideological understanding that is difficult to apply in an online environment that sees 500 hours of YouTube video, 3.3 million Facebook posts, and 3.8 million Google searches every minute. Automation and innovation, rooted in clear principles for regulation, will be required to help negotiate the violent/non-violent extremism nexus online at scale.

**Why It Matters**

What does the above tell us about the relationship between violent and non-violent extremism? The research demonstrates there is considerable ideological overlap in the content of non-violent and violent Islamist texts; that a majority of violent extremists across two geographic samples have had non-violent Islamist backgrounds; and that there are unique challenges in navigating violent and non-violent Islamist content online. But such insights only begin to tell us about the interaction between extremist ideas and terrorist behaviours.

While it is easy to focus on the ideological similarities between violent and non-violent extremist manifestations, there are also important distinctions that affect how we understand, and how we respond to both. Demos has argued about the importance of distinguishing between violent and non-violent processes of radicalisation, claiming “a successful counter-terrorism strategy must be based on a clear understanding of these distinct forms of radicalisation.”

But what is clear is that ideological and religious literacy is essential for effective counter-extremism policy making. If governments are to take a stand against non-violent extremism, then such attitudes must be framed as in itself undesirable, and the reasons for this clearly articulated, rather than unscientifically presented as inevitably leading to terrorism. The UK’s 2015 Counter Extremism Strategy, for example, is framed around the ‘wider harms’ of extremism beyond violence, including the polarisation of communities. Furthermore, it is essential such efforts to define ‘non-violent extremism’ must not problematise mainstream religious expression, and therefore feed into the narrative that counter-extremism constitutes an attack on religion. Islamist voices often present themselves as representatives of the religious mainstream, so it is essential that government’s role in countering extremism is firmly contextualised rooted within civil society, working with credible religious leaders and community voices who are determined to reclaim their faith from distorted and politicised ideologies, whether violent or non-violent.
References


3. The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change defines Islamism as a modern religious-political ideology requiring a dominant role for an interpretation of Islam as state law, while Salafi-jihadism is defined a transnational religious-political ideology based on a belief in violent jihadism and return to the perceived Islam of the Prophet's followers.

4. HM Government, Prevent Strategy, Cm8092 (June 2011), chapter. 6

5. HM Government, Prevent Strategy, Cm8092 (June 2011), paras. 3.10, 5.34


12. Ibid. p.2


20. Milestones to Militancy, P.10


25. Mubaraz Ahmed and Fred Lloyd George, A War of Keywords, Tony Blair Institute, June 2016, https://institute.global/sites/default/files/inline-files/IGC_War%20of%20Keywords_23.08.17_0.pdf


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