A Policy-Oriented Framework for Understanding Violent Extremism

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Violent extremism represents a serious challenge to open and democratic societies. This article presents a framework for understanding violent extremism in the context of "lone-wolf" attacks in Western societies. The framework combines social, political, and psychological factors and highlights the importance of integrating the available evidence from multiple disciplines to develop cogent, effective policy. Specifically, in addition to a broad survey of motivational factors, the article draws on terror management theory to provide insight into the interaction between religiosity and violence.

Counterextremism programs are most successful at mitigating the risk of violence when they are focused on behavior, rather than ideology, when they are community-based and funded, rather than government-run, and when they are not seen to be attempts to control or marginalize Muslim communities.

Violent actions motivated by extremist beliefs constitute a relatively small threat to public safety in the "West" when considered in a purely statistical or comparative context. Such actions, however, have a disproportionate impact on individuals' and communities' sense of safety and security. Political and media narratives surrounding them stoke the fear that "no one is safe," that everyone is a potential target, and that terror may be visited on any part of society by anyone at any time. These narratives are reinforced by the rise of "lone-wolf" attacks that appear haphazard and indiscriminate. The involvement of otherwise seemingly "normal" individuals in some of these attacks further contributes to the narratives. The overall impact of these actions and the public response to them is a reflexive push toward greater policing and securitization of society. While right-wing and conservative politicians and policy makers have traditionally favored a policing and securitization approach, over the past fifteen years since the events of September 11, 2001, centrist and left-wing policy makers have also felt compelled to shift in a similar direction.

Because of this significant impact on policy and societal cohesion, an understanding of the nature of the threat and how to most effectively counter it is needed. This article proposes a psychosocial ecological framework to describe the elements involved in radicalization that may allow for more coherent policy development. Though a full taxonomy of violent extremist behavior is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that from a purely functional perspective, there are several different manifestations of violent extremism, and the distinctions among them are important for the purposes of public policy. This article addresses two manifestations: the desire or willingness to perpetrate acts of violence outside of what would normally be considered a theater of war or conflict zone and the desire to travel to a conflict zone to participate in acts of violence. More specifically, this article considers violent extremism in the context of individual Muslims.

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The proposed framework is premised on several assumptions that are drawn from the scholarship of violent extremism but that may be in contention in popular culture and political narratives. This divergence between scholarly findings and political narratives is one of the obstacles to proposing and developing effective policy recommendations.

The most salient assumptions about violent extremism are the following:

1. There is nothing unique about Islam or Muslims that drives the process of violent extremism. This phenomenon is observed in other faiths and ideologies and other ethnic and cultural groups. Violent extremism can best be examined as part of a continuum in time and space rather than a unique phenomenon.[1]
2. There is no single path to violent extremism; nor are there infinite paths. The best approach to understanding violent extremism is complex, nuanced, and multilayered. Hence, effective public policy to counter violent extremism should be multimodal and nuanced rather than simplistic and reductionist. Often the most public counterextremism efforts are the least effective.
3. Combatting violent extremism as an isolated, disjointed exercise is difficult. Efforts are needed at governmental and societal levels and at local, national, and international levels. Nevertheless, in the absence of a comprehensive solution, focused efforts are necessary and possible.
4. Language is important. I have used "violent extremism" and "countering extremism" throughout rather than "radicalization." Etymologically, radicalism is the notion that change must be rooted in fundamental change in society. Radical political ideologies have been the progenitors of many progressive policy changes. Since extremism means being furthest away from the mainstream, we must acknowledge that the center does shift over time. Victorians, for example, would likely consider twenty-first-century Anglo-Saxon sexual mores to be extreme. Pacifism is one form of an extreme. We can debate whether pacifists are a threat to national security in times of war, but we acknowledge that the threat to our values, national interests, and security derives more from what individuals do rather than abstain from doing.[2] Hence violent extremism, not radicalism or extremist thought, should be our target.

My five-point framework for understanding violent extremism is based on a review of the literature and my interactions with at-risk individuals over the past several years. This framework is intended to be partially compensatory. For an individual to become engaged in the planning or execution of an act of violence, a minimum level of each of the five elements of the framework must be satisfied. But different individuals may be defined by the extent to which each element is foregrounded. To meet the challenge of violent extremism, public policy should address all five elements: ideology, grievances, alternatives, resources and opportunity, and the extremist person.

The Framework

Ideology

At the heart of violent extremism is a set of beliefs, be they nationalistic, religious, or other. Beyond these beliefs is the image of a utopian world toward which violent extremists strive. Though detailing that utopian world is accomplished to varying degrees, all extremist ideologies make clear that the existing world is not the utopian world, and there is no hope of its becoming so without a violent confrontation. As an example in modern Islamic thought, Sayed Qutb

presented such a utopian ideal, a fundamentally different position from that of Hasan al-Banna. Al-Banna held that Egyptian society and the Egyptian state are fundamentally Islamic albeit imperfect and in need of reform that can be brought about gradually. Qutb, in contrast, held that society and the state are fundamentally un-Islamic and can be made Islamic only by upending the current order.[3] There are important reasons that ensured that most readers of Qutb neither espoused violence nor held extremist views.[4] Nonetheless, these utopian views became the ideological basis for small violent groups in 1970s Egypt.

More recently, groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh have embraced what can be loosely described as a "Salafist-jihadist" ideology.[5] The defining feature of Salafism that makes violent extremism possible is the emphasis on the Truth as One and Indivisible. Salafism, however, is not a sufficient condition for violence. "Jihadism" has been used to refer to the idea that physical force is the primary means through which change can be brought about and that other means, such as preaching or societal reform, are secondary and can be employed only once force has succeeded. The combination of Salafism and Jihadism can therefore give rise to a worldview in which adherents have certainty that they hold the Truth and that they are compelled to use violence to bring about the Truth. For many Muslims, however, the use of the term "jihad" to connote anything other than the struggle to achieve self-purification or the justified use of violence within specific boundaries is offensive.

This explication of the ideological position underlying violent extremism has an important corollary. Because this ideology foregrounds violence as the means of bringing about Truth in this world, the movement privileges the desire and the ability to plan and execute violent acts, rather than piety, knowledge, or personal observance. And for those privileged few who are called to serve the Cause of Truth, personal behavior in keeping with the tenets of Islam is desirable but not necessary. Rather, moral superiority can be achieved, not through personal effort, but by believing in violence as the path to establishing the Truth. Interviews with local recruits to the cause of Daesh show them to have very little knowledge of Islamic tenets, of the Qur'an, hadith, or the history of Islam.[6] And in recently released documents, over 70 percent of recruits to Daesh describe themselves as having only basic knowledge about even the basics of Islam.[7]

The profiles of many extremists reflect that dichotomy. Several of the individuals who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks had a record of non-observance. Some were involved in extra- or premarital sexual relationships; others frequented strip clubs. Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, who attacked the Canadian Parliament in October 2014, was described as a drug-addicted petty felon.[8] Brahim Abdessalam, who blew himself up in Paris in November 2015, owned a bar. His brother, Salah, was often seen with a beer in one hand and a joint in the other hand, approvingly watching Daesh recruitment.[9] Salah was also identified as a gay prostitute in the gay bars he frequented. Bouhlel, the Nice attacker who mowed down people during Bastille Day celebrations last summer, was a known womanizer.[10]

In short, for some, the allure of violent extremist ideology is its emphasis on whether one is willing to approve of violence and engage in it, rather than undergo any kind of personal struggle or journey through the faith. To paraphrase Adlai Stevenson, extremist ideologies make it easier to die for one's beliefs than to live up to them.

How does one combat the lure of an ideology that is so muscular and utopian? The current approach has been for governments (Western and Middle Eastern) to encourage support for scholars and ideologies likely to help achieve strategic objectives.[11] The association of such efforts with governments, however, has likely limited their appeal.

Grievances

The second element necessary for an individual to morph into violent extremism is the existence of a grievance or set of grievances.[12] These can be political, economic, or social grievances, and they may be local or national.[13] Perhaps the most striking example is the lack of opportunities for acceptance and upward mobility for young people of North African extraction growing up French in France. In 2005, riots lasting nearly three weeks forced the declaration of a state of emergency in parts of Paris. The trigger for the riots was the deaths of two young Frenchmen trying to escape police interrogation about a break-in. The rioting seemed disproportionate to the instigating incident and revealed a large fault line in the banlieues. These men, like other immigrants or children of immigrants who grew up in the West, seem to belong nowhere.[14] They are neither Arab nor traditionally Muslim, nor are they fully integrated and accepted in their societies and countries of birth and rearing. As in the more recent Black Lives Matter and the Idle No More protests, another underlying reason for the riots seems to be social and economic disparity and the sense of being a second-class citizen in one's own country. Of note, according to a poll taken in 2014, 16 percent of all French citizens and 27 percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-four approve of Daesh. Muslims, however, constitute only 5 to10 percent of the population of France. In other words, support for Daesh extends well beyond French Muslims, even if one assumes that all French Muslims approve of Daesh, an unlikely scenario.[15] Similar, but less stark, are the numbers in the United Kingdom, where 7 percent of respondents in a 2015 poll support Daesh, but only 4.5 percent of the population is Muslim.[16] These numbers are significantly higher than favorability of Daesh in Muslim majority countries.[17]

Grievances are most effective in this context when they are real and can be credibly advanced as requiring action. On the international stage, the ongoing and worsening plight of Palestinians is the classic example. The situation in Syria has now become another textbook example. As of fall 2016, for every Syrian killed by Daesh, eight have been killed by the Assad regime. Yet Daesh has garnered military action and the greater share of attention from Western governments. Even now with the devastating stories of refugees dying on beaches and in trucks, there is hardly a serious discussion of the root cause of this massive dislocation and how to prevent it: dealing with the brutal regime of Bashar El-Assad. Instead, Western governments focus on the extremism of the Syrian rebels and the success of dismantling El-Assad's chemical weapons regime, as if how Syrians are killed matters to them more than living.[18]

In the domain of grievances is a considerable lack of shared understanding. Many Muslims —irrespective of their ideological stance—view the world today as a place where Muslims are under siege.[19] This view is reflected in a change in the practice of imams. Imams traditionally pray for "oppressed" or disadvantaged Muslims around the world at the end of their Friday sermon. But now many have ceased to name a specific group lest they offend members of the congregation by omitting a group with which they have strong emotional ties. Such groups are found in areas well beyond the Middle East. The Rohingya in Burma, Muslims in the Central African Republic, and the Uighurs in China have all recently joined the Palestinians, Somalis, Iraqis, Afghans, and now Syrians on the list.

The mainstream narrative in North America and Europe, however, dismisses Muslim grievances as the result of a victim complex or as a dysfunctional reaction to long-gone disparities and injustices, such as colonialism. According to a popular right-wing narrative, the real reason Muslims are involved in so many conflicts is that "something" about Islam or Muslims makes Muslims incapable of or unwilling to peacefully co-exist with others.

The issue, however, is not just personal suffering. Through case studies of assassins and lone-wolf terrorists, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko have identified two profiles of potential lone-wolf terrorists: the "disconnected-disordered profile" and the "caring-consistency profile." The former refers to "individuals with a grievance and weapons experience who are socially disconnected and stressed with a psychological disorder." The latter refers to "individuals [who] have . . . felt strongly the suffering of others and a personal responsibility to reduce or revenge this suffering."[20]

Alternatives

Grievances and ideology as drivers of violent extremism may be containable if individuals can better their situation and resolve their grievances through credible alternatives to violence. The presence of real alternatives for societal change allows individuals and groups to compete for the hearts and minds of their fellow human beings by offering them their vision of a better society. Alternatives to violence can, at least, greatly reduce the attraction of violence. But in the absence of any such alternatives, violent extremism is seen as the only credible path to addressing grievances and becomes attractive.

The Arab Spring provided a natural experiment to test this hypothesis. Between 2011 when the Arab Spring took hold in Tunisia and Egypt and mid-2013 when the counterrevolution prevailed in Egypt through a military coup, Tunisia through capitulation, and Libya through civil war, the appeal and traction of Al-Qaeda appeared to decline.[21]

In the eighteen days of peaceful demonstration in Cairo's Tahrir Square, "perceived unarmed civil resistance delivered a heavy blow to Jihadism and significantly undermined its rationale (that armed activism is the most effective and/or most legitimate tool for change)."[22] By the end of 2012, "the perception of increasing irrelevance" had become "more pronounced." "A core argument of Al-Qaeda," James J. F. Forest points out, "has been that corrupt, Western-backed regimes can only be changed through the use of terrorist attacks to mobilize the *ummah* [transnational Muslim community]. But in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, change has taken place without any meaningful involvement whatsoever by Al-Qaeda. This, in essence, discredits Al-Qaeda's ideology."[23]

The Egyptian military coup of 2013 and subsequent support for the coup and for the military's repressiveness by European and U.S. government officials and pundits, however, had the opposite effect. Because peaceful change had failed to bring about permanent change, proponents of the 2011 uprisings were open to charges of naiveté and failure to understand the "real" nature of the conflict—that it is an existential conflict between Islam and the West in which force, rather than peaceful resistance or electoral politics, presents the only real solution to myriad grievances.[24] The rise to power, in the United States, of a group of individuals who echo similar sentiments is hardly encouraging.[25]

Resources and Opportunity

"Resources and opportunity" covers several criteria essential to the actualization of violent extremism. These range from exposure to violent extremist recruiters—of Westerners drawn to fight with Daesh, some 75 percent of whom are recruited by a family member or friend—to access to the resources necessary to travel to Syria, Afghanistan, or Mali or to mount an attack at home. The resources and opportunity necessary for lone-wolf attacks are very different from those necessary for attacks by a violently extremist proto-state such as Daesh, and increasingly, lone

wolfs are showing that acts of violent extremism can be mounted with minimal resources: a truck can be as deadly as an automatic weapon or a bomb.

Law enforcement and security agencies face a dilemma about resources and opportunities in developing strategies to deal with violent extremism. On one hand, do they wait until a lone wolf or a group of people has accumulated resources and found the opportunity to commit violence before acting? In an effort to avert disaster, can they legitimately "test" targets by providing them with resources and opportunity, or is doing so a form of entrapment? On the other hand, how can law enforcement and security agencies limit resources and opportunity without compromising the openness of our societies by altering the free flow of goods and people? How can they do so and still safeguard privacy and securitize societies?

The Extremist Person

At the heart of violent extremism is a person. The ultimate goal of "radicalization" research has been to find a profile that security services can work from that that fits all extremists with 100 percent sensitivity and 100 percent specificity. Though no such universal profile exists, specific profiles, such as that of the lone-wolf attacker or the person who travels overseas to join Daesh, may be possible.

One of the tensions in the debate about violent extremism has been whether individuals who perpetrate violent attacks such as New York 9/11 or London 7/7 are "real Muslims." Muslims who are not involved in such attacks argue that the perpetrators are not real Muslims, whereas the perpetrators themselves often argue that they are. They may leave written or visual testimony in which they identify Islam as their cause and motive. But then later a story emerges that reveals how little actual commitment some perpetrators have to the tenets of Islam. In recent cases in Canada, the United States, France, and Belgium, where lone-wolf attacks were planned or executed, the individuals involved were revealed to have had significant struggles with drugs, crime, sexuality or all three. Reports by security services in the United Kingdom reveal that a religious Islamic upbringing tends to protect against engagement in violent extremism.[26]

How do we reconcile these findings? Terror management theory (TMT), which has roots in existential philosophy, may provide an answer. TMT posits that since human beings are conscious beings, they become conscious of their own mortality. Yet human beings have an innate desire to live. The juxtaposition of the awareness of mortality and the desire to live can create potentially paralyzing terror. To mitigate that terror, human beings engage in a variety of tactics. The proximal defense against the existential terror of dying is to deny the possibility: I'm too young, I'm too healthy, and so on. Those defenses succeed only to the extent that they allow one to avoid being confronted with one's own mortality. The more fundamental defense, however, is a belief in immortality, symbolic or real. Real immortality is what faith systems promise: heaven and an afterlife. Symbolic immortality lies in the belief that we will be remembered and that we will live on the hearts of our fellow human beings, through our children or a legacy of some manner. Immortality, real or symbolic, can mitigate the terror of mortality only if one has sufficient self-esteem—that is, if one believes that one has lived life in accordance with a values system that promises immortality. Existential terror may ensue when one is confronted with the prospect of dying but has not developed an effective belief in immortality or lacks the level of self-esteem to believe that one is deserving of immortality.[27] A corollary of TMT is that when confronted with death, individuals will identify more tightly with their own worldview and denigrate other worldviews. In a sense, a particular worldview can mitigate death-related anxiety only if it is true.

The need to maintain that belief results in a tighter identification with one's own worldview and attacks on other, competing worldviews. In addition, in a postmodern world, threats to identity may serve as surrogates for mortality salience, such that threats to cultural and religious identities may instigate a hostile reaction to "others."[28]

Individuals whose fund of religious knowledge is limited or who cannot draw on a fund of spiritual enlightenment or an inclusive and uplifting community in the face of low self-esteem may find that mortality salience drives them to acts of supreme self-redemption, such as imagined martyrdom. And so, in the face of personal crises, such as marital breakdown and financial problems, they may seek to regain their self-esteem through spectacular acts of terror.[29]

Daesh and troubled individuals use religion to establish an "us versus them" world. Punitive security measures against all Muslims reinforce this binary vision. Populists such as Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, and others seem to be unaware of how they mirror the very narrative they claim to be fighting. Their attacks may spur a generation of young Muslims into approaching their faith, not as a path to spiritual and social fulfillment and enlightenment, but rather as an extrinsic identity that helps them assert their place in a hostile world. In doing so they play right into the hands of Daeshite narratives that reinforce what TMT studies warn against.

TMT, however, also provides promise for solutions to potential radicalization. Research drawing on TMT has shown that intrinsic but not extrinsic religiosity mitigates anxiety induced by mortality salience. In the face of reminders of their own mortality, faith can help people be at peace with themselves and with those who hold a competing worldview when it is a part of who they are, rather than only as part of a collective identity.[30] And in other TMT studies, priming subjects with positive verses from their holy texts, for example, "Do good to others because Allah loves those who do good" (Qur'an, 28:77) or "Love your neighbor as yourself," reduces hatred and the tendency to lash out against others.[31] These findings are a direct challenge to the profiling effort. The definition of intrinsic religiosity as faith being an integral aspect of one's being is likely difficult without increasing personal observance, which some security-minded experts have advanced as a red flag for violent extremism.

The Framework as a Whole

Among the many frameworks for progressions to violent extremism that have been advanced in the literature,[32] the framework presented here overlaps most closely with Moghaddam's "staircase to terrorism," though it is distinct in several ways.[33] It is nonprogressive and compensatory, and it emphasizes behavior (resources and opportunity) rather than mindset. Each element is potentially independent; individuals may be drawn to violent extremism through an overemphasis of one element over the others. Identifying these elements can help shape policy directions for combating violent extremism.[34] Any group making evidence-informed policy recommendations, however, faces challenges such as those described in the following section.

Challenges to Making Policy Recommendations

Defining "Extremism" and "Radicalization"

So far I have focused on specific aspects of violent extremism, defined earlier as "the desire or willingness to perpetrate acts of violence outside of what would normally be considered a theater of war or conflict zone and the desire to travel to a conflict zone to participate in acts of violence."

But violence is itself often an instrument of public policy, and government efforts to justify that violence often necessitate a politicization of the discussion on violent extremism and radicalization. This phenomenon is evident in the war on Daesh: foreign fighters who join Daesh are identified as radicalized violent extremists, but those who join Kurdish groups fighting Daesh are not.[35] An oppressive government that "denies its citizens individual freedoms" can be described as extremist "to the extent . . . that individual freedoms represent a valued norm."[36] Yet neither state violence, particularly by allies of Western nations, nor oppression by regimes, particularly when they are Western allies, is treated as an example of violent extremism. Clarity of terms is important in the formulation of policy to avoid acting in opposition to liberal democratic values and alienating communities whose help is crucial for this effort.[37] By including "resources and opportunity" as an essential feature of my framework, I am siding with those who argue that policy makers should focus on violent extremism as behavior rather than as mindset.[38] I believe that making the distinction between behavior and mindset and focusing on behavior is important if policies that oppose violent extremism are to avoid the counterproductive effect of targeting Muslim communities, especially young men in those communities.[39]

Combatting Politicization of the Effort against Violent Extremism

The current effort against violent extremism is taking place against the background of increasing nationalism and xenophobia and the rise of the so-called Alt-Right. Politicians on the right have wielded the threat of violent extremism as a partisan political issue and have called for policies that are clearly anti-liberal and ineffective, most notably using torture and banning Muslims from entry into their countries.[40] In response, centrist and left-wing politicians have sometimes found it expedient to reaffirm their commitment to national security by adopting watered-down elements of the same policies, contributing to an overall atmosphere of hysteria that has spilled over into initiatives to fight violent extremism.[41]

Identifying the Metrics of Success

The rate of violent extremist incidents in the Western world is already very low. The glib observation that more Americans die from lightning strikes than from terrorist attacks.[42] raises the question of what metric can be used to measure the success of policies to combat violent extremism. A zero-incident outcome may not be possible, and the resources required to achieve such an outcome will have a significant negative effect on society.

Policy Implications

Ideology

While necessary to the development of violent extremists, ideology is likely the lowest-yield element identified in this framework as an aid to reducing violent extremism. As discussed earlier, ideology in and of itself provides insufficient motivation for an individual to commit a violent extremist act. Furthermore, an individual's understanding of the ideological basis for violent extremism is most often shallow and hence is not necessarily countered by another ideological recasting of Islam.

Community-based efforts to counter ideology can sometimes be effective, while state-based efforts tend to backfire and are fraught with problems.[43] As Jennifer Hendrickson points out, a

connection between ideological counternarratives and government "negatively impacts program legitimacy."[44]

The salient aspect of the ideology under discussion is not religion but the muscular, purposefulness of the utopia promised by violent extremists. To counter the violent extremist allure of purpose, we must offer a narrative that gives young people, particularly those at risk, a sense of purpose. Scott Atran puts it bluntly: "When I hear another tired appeal to 'moderate Islam,' usually from much older folk, I ask: Are you kidding? Don't any of you have teenage children? When did 'moderate' anything have wide appeal for youth yearning for adventure, glory, and significance?"[45] Hence, the constant refrain from politicians that "Islam is a religion of peace" and their attempts to foster forums that emphasize pacifism as a response to current crises are unlikely to sway those gravitating to violent extremism. Rather, focusing on activities and programs that give young people purpose and stature in their communities may have a far greater effect.

The constant regrets, denials, disavowals, and condemnations that Muslim communities issue in response to various acts of terrorism may well appear to younger Muslims as defensiveness, capitulation, and failure, further alienating them from community leaders and institutions. But those reflexive responses are borne of decades of being targeted and demonized. Political leaders and the media have an important role to play in producing a new discourse that redefines the relationship between Muslim communities and the wider society when acts of terrorism are perpetrated in terms other than security and policing.

Grievances

Grievances are central to the recruitment of individuals to violent extremist causes. And while the complete elimination of grievances may be impossible, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that we are witness to a colossal failure of leadership across the world, in which the interests of large groups of people, of nations are being sacrificed for short-term political interests.[46] With an unprecedented number of refugees in the world, we cannot pretend that all is well or trust that spin and propaganda and ignoring the problem will make it go away. We are experiencing a vacuum of leadership such that even the rhetoric of idealism has given way to expressions of xenophobia as national policy.

This sentiment is not new. President Dwight D. Eisenhower expressed it in a speech at Columbia University in 1950.

> As friends of free people everywhere in the world, we can by our own example—our conduct in every crisis, real or counterfeit; our resistance to propaganda and passion; our readiness to seek adjustments and compromise of difference—we can by our own example ceaselessly expand understanding among the nations. We must never forget that international friendship is achieved through rumors ignored, propaganda challenged and exposed; through patient loyalty to those who have proved themselves worthy of it; through help freely given, where help is needed and merited. In rights and in opportunity, in loyalty and in responsibility to ideals, we are and must remain equal. Peace is more the product of our day-to-day living than of a spectacular program intermittently executed.
>
> The best foreign policy is to live our daily lives in honesty, decency and integrity; at home, making our own land a more fitting habitation for free men; and abroad, joining with those of like mind and heart, to make of the world a place where all men can dwell in peace. Neither palsied by fear nor duped by dreams but

strong in the rightness of our purpose, we can then place our case and cause before the bar of world opinion—history's final arbiter between nations.[47]

In the field of counterradicalization research, a similar appeal is occasionally made. In an in-depth review of the literature, Schmid draws the following conclusions about counternarratives:

Credibility and legitimacy are core ingredients of any political narrative hoping to catch the imagination of people at home and abroad. They are also key resources in counter-radicalisation and CT [counterterrorism]. Governments need not be perfect before they can effectively engage in successful counter-radicalisation efforts. However, they have, in the eyes of domestic and foreign publics, to be markedly better than extremist parties and terrorist organisations. Political leaders need to stand on the moral high ground when it comes to fighting abuses of power, redress injustices and address popular grievances. Wherever that can be achieved at least in part, extremists and terrorists have, in the long run, no chance of success.[48]

Alternatives

Alternatives to violent extremism that can be offered at the local level must include programs that help end discrimination and fight police abuse, that provide opportunities for youth employment, and that empower young people, allowing them space to be agents, to be active, and to productively discharge their energies. A fierce defense of democracy abroad is essential if we are to successfully promote the narrative that peaceful change is possible and laudable. Support for autocrats must not be the norm to protect trade or influence. Rather it must be seen as the exception dictated by compelling pragmatic considerations and must be balanced with credible support for human rights.

Resources and Opportunity

Policies for countering violent extremism must take into account the tensions between the need for policing and securitization and between protecting civil rights and not fostering a paranoid state.[49]

The Extremist Person

TMT framing raises important issues for Muslim communities and societies at large. On one hand, it is clear that individuals with religious education and an intrinsic sense of religiosity are best protected against violent extremism. On the other hand, some Western jurisdictions have a studied resistance to Islamic education and practice. The framework described here would support the notion that practices championed by French secularists likely increase the risk of violent extremism by marginalizing religious education and instruction and pushing an identity-based, extrinsic religiosity on young people. The TMT framework may explain in part the relative success of North American Muslim communities compared with European Muslim communities. Leaders within the Muslim community and in society at large must build a rhetorical framework that contextualizes identity as the main driver of religiosity. Some converts may be drawn to Islam as a communal identity rather than as a means to rediscovery of purpose and the meaning of the human experiences. It is important to note that this does not mean an apolitical or apathetic rendering of the faith but rather a focus on understanding Islam holistically. A focus on programs

that advocate for a constructive, balanced understanding of Islam, though they currently exist in many communities, may be even more necessary as a feature of the next phase of community building. For many Muslim communities, however, funding is a problem and government funding may be difficult or seen as suspect. The problem of funding might be rectified by encouraging charitable foundations to fill the funding gap and to tackle issues of citizenship, inclusiveness, tolerance, and acceptance. Efforts should be broad based and not focused only on Muslim communities.

Conclusions

The fight against violent extremism cannot be successful if policies, programs, and initiatives are subject to cynical political manipulation. Politicians are undoubtedly under great pressure to prevent violent acts and to be seen working to prevent them. But the best approaches are multifaceted and are directed to community building, youth empowerment, and improved societal cohesiveness. Constant tirades against immigrants and the alleged threat of "Islamic terror" serve no constructive purpose. They only exacerbate the differences within multicultural societies and drive marginalized youths into the folds of those who promise to vindicate them against such rhetoric. The Muslim community is not responsible for terrorism or for preventing it, but like all other stakeholders, Muslim leaders may benefit from a re-evaluation of the current challenges to construct better community education and awareness efforts.

Notes

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[4] D. D. Cakir, "Islamist Texts in Practice: Commemorating Qutb in Turkey before and after the Arab Spring," *Muslim World* 105, no. 4 (2015): 540–60.

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