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Research Article

Why Individuals and Communities Do Not Turn to Violent Extremism

Colin Powers,* Erik Skare, Georges Fahmi, Nouran Ahmed, Ahmad Mhidi, Myriam Ababsa and Olivier Roy

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Conceptual and epistemological challenges have to date constrained the generation of scientific knowledge on violent extremism. This article inverts the field's seminal research question with an eye on furnishing a sturdier foundation for inquiry and theory building. Rather than seeking generalisable truths on why violent extremism occurs, we induce tentative propositions on why it does not, particularly within the context of enabling environments. Based on original data gathered through case studies conducted in the Middle East and North Africa, our primary findings are that the probability of violent extremism in enabling environments is reduced by three variables: i) hard interventions by the state; ii) the availability of credible ideological alternatives; and iii) the opportunity to opt out of the economy of violent extremism. At the conceptual level, we also propose that violent extremism be considered as a modality of action practiced by discrete political actors—namely, terrorist organisations—rather than as a phenomenon more diffusely pervading societies, nations, or faiths.

Keywords: violent extremism, terrorism, counter-terrorism, Middle East and North Africa

*Corresponding author: Colin Powers, Centre for International Studies (CERI), email: colin.powers11@gmail.com

Introduction

As an object of academic inquiry, violent extremism has proven somewhat intractable. Despite an enormity of funding mobilised and labour hours devoted, progress in theory building remains slow and uneven. The disappointing yield on investment can be partially attributed to enduring conceptual and epistemological challenges. Concerning the former, the literature on violent extremism and its cognate, radicalisation, are still marked by discord when it comes to specifying what the constitutive properties of the phenomenon actually are.[1] It is with reason that Kundnani and Hayes posit violent extremism is an "even more nebulous" concept than terrorism, the shibboleth par excellence upon which a forever-war waged on endlessly variable enemies was once launched.[2] As for epistemology, if understandable in light of the inaccessibility of relevant research subjects, the sparseness of the empirics gathered on violent extremism has, to date, nevertheless invited speculative forms of claim-making into places where scientific testing ought to be. The scarce use of gold standard methods—namely, randomised control trials and natural experiments[3]—has meant spurious correlations have often been able to pass themselves off as causalities. Indeed, the failure to establish or reference relevant base rates has allowed scholars to assign predictive power to variables without screening false positives and negatives from their results' sections.[4]

Beyond matters of conceptualisation and epistemology, the frailties of knowledge on violent extremism can also be traced to how problems are constructed at the onset of investigative processes. As a rule, scholars of violent extremism tend to formulate research questions aimed at explaining its occurrence. Functionally speaking, this choice assigns the scholar the task of inducing generalisable laws from outcomes that are (i) exceedingly rare; (ii) temporally and geographically variant; and (iii) the product of configural causality. The margins of difficulty thereby taken on are about as high as they come. That so many fail to clear the bar is only to be expected.

Cognisant of existing lacunae and where some of the hurdles to progress lie, this article adopts a different tack in hopes of gaining purchase on violent extremism. Broadly speaking, our approach is premised on two recalibrations. The first is an inversion of the field's seminal research question: rather than attempt to build a general theory of why violent extremism occurs, we will instead forward several tentative propositions on why it does not, particularly within the context of enabling environments. Here, we define enabling environments as circumstances where macro-level variables historically associated with the emergence of violent extremism—be they sociological, political or economic in nature[5]— coalesce with an individual and/or community's opportunity to engage in organised and collective praxes of violent extremism (i.e. the opportunity to join an extant terrorist organisation).

Though our efforts concentrate on unwinding the causalities that lead individuals and communities away from participation in organised and collective praxes of violent extremism, the analytical power of our study ought to extend to participation in lone-wolf expressions of violent extremism as well. We make this claim in view of an empirical record suggesting there is little basis for classifying lone-wolf forms of violent extremism as a category ontologically separate from classically organised forms of violent extremism. A wide literature establishes the "loneness" of lone wolves to be something of a misnomer, as "outside ties are considered key elements in the adoption and maintenance of the motive for lone actors, and sometimes the means

to commit terrorist violence."[6] Further, whether relevant parties ultimately carry out attacks alone or not, a preponderance of evidence indicates that lone actors are not the autonomous, self-directing agents they sometimes appear to be, but rather, actors that are anchored within a wider social milieu and/or actors animated by their internalisation of ideological content furnished from outside parties.[7]

Inverting violent extremism's classic research question can, in our estimations, be additive for several reasons. In the most immediate sense, it demands investigation of oft-neglected moderating variables—those operating at the levels of groups and communities most especially—and how they may relate to the (non)manifestation of violent extremism. Given the prevalence of macro and micro theorising, the foregrounding of meso-level causalities stands to present considerable value. Setting non-occurrence as our dependent variable also affords a novel means of engaging presuppositions which have long been put forth concerning the drivers of violent extremism. Frequently marshalled for the purpose of structuring or rationalising policy choices as these presuppositions are, their being falsified through an explanation of the "dogs that don't bark" would in and of itself constitute an important contribution to the literature.

If turning the field on its head so to explain non-occurrence represents the first recalibration of our approach, the second pertains to conceptualisation. We begin by establishing two social facts: i) the presence of active terrorist organisations constitutes a necessary precondition for violent extremism to manifest at the scale and consistency needed to either damage society's basic functionality or fundamentally challenge states' claims to authority across time;[8] and ii) active terrorist organisations do not spontaneously materialise upon the coalescence of conditions—be they social, political, economic, cultural, or ideological—often thought to be causally implicated in violent extremism. Based on these two facts, we posit that terrorist organisations—whose emergence and reproduction is always contingent and political in nature—need be conceptually considered the primary subject of violent extremism.

We develop the two tenets of our approach in full in the next sections of this article. Three propositions concerning the non-occurrence of violent extremism in the face of enabling environments are presented in Section One. Leaning on practices developed in grounded theory, each of these respective propositions was induced from original data gathered through case studies conducted in the Middle East and North Africa.[9] After developing our meso-level arguments on non-occurrence, the second section proceeds to our proposed revisions on the conceptualisation of violent extremism. From there, we conclude the article with a parting section recapitulating our main arguments, discussing limitations, and considering future research directions.

Explaining the Dogs That Don't Bark, Even When Prompted

Violent extremism's non-occurrence within contexts classified as enabling environments constitutes a puzzle of immense analytical import. If satisfactorily unwound, it can speak not only to what does and does not cause violent extremism, but to what may prevent it as well.

To engage this problem, team members collected and analysed data through the conduct of three MENA-based case studies. The first case focused on Islamist Egyptian youth and their nonengagement in violent extremism following the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.[10] The second case focused on the village of Swedan in Deir ez-Zor, Syria, and its popula-

tion's nonengagement with violent extremism following the country's descent into civil war. The third focused on the relative non-occurrence of violent extremism inside the Jordanian national theatre in the years following the emergence of the Islamic State. Though case studies evince considerable heterogeneity—be it in terms of the conditions encountered or the level of analysis employed by the researcher—they share a common dependent variable: a nonengagement in organised violent extremism amongst research subjects encountering enabling environments.

Through probing these case studies individually and comparatively, we identified three variables as having exerted a significant effect upon the outcomes in question: i) hard interventions by the state; ii) the availability of credible ideological alternatives; and iii) the opportunity to opt out of the economy of violent extremism. Designated as meso causalities, we hypothesise that these variables contribute to the non-occurrence of violent extremism by moderating the relation between enabling environments and individual/group behaviour.

Hard Interventions by the State

In terms of mechanisms, our cases suggest that hard interventions raise the probability of the non-occurrence of violent extremism in the short term through the workings of two interconnected causalities: (i) the degradation of a terrorist group's organisational and operational capacity, and (ii) the disincentivising of radicalised persons from making the jump into violent extremism.[11] At the same time, our cases also suggest that hard interventions may increase the probability of violent extremism in the long term. They do so through the promotion of environmental conditions—namely, high prevalence of state violence and high incarceration rates—known to be conducive for the occurrence of violent extremism. MENA state repression has, for example, produced unintended consequences in the past like the internationalisation of Salafi jihadism in the 1980s.[12]

Our claims on hard interventions' short-term efficacy are primarily derived from our analysis of the aforementioned Islamist youth cohort in Egypt. The members of the fifty-person cohort comprising our sample had been active participants in the uprising which took place in Egypt between January and February of 2011 as well as active participants in sit-ins staged in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the government of Mohamed Morsi between June and August of 2013. Given the locations of the sit-ins in question, the geographic composition of the cohort leans towards Upper Egypt, greater Cairo, and the Delta governorates. In terms of demographics, all members were between the ages of eighteen and thirty at the time of the events in question.

As revealed through semi-structured interviews, during the era of the sit-ins, research subjects universally evinced confidence in—and a commitment to—nonviolent forms of political contention. Deemed ethically appropriate and efficacious as both a tactic of resistance and a means of advancing their agenda, commitments to nonviolence were retained even after Egyptian President Morsi was removed from office by the Armed Forces. For months on end, principals participated in protests and sit-ins demanding Morsi's restoration to power, all the while respecting the tenets of peaceful agitation. After sit-in protests were brought to a violent end by the security forces in August of 2013, however, principals underwent a cognitive transition. Frustrated into disaffection, they not only expressed a loss of faith in nonviolent praxes as a general matter, but a specific rejection of the MB's cautious approach to post-2011 politics.

Drawing on the clarity of hindsight, the overwhelming consensus amongst them was that the party- movement had been naïve and nonstrategic during the democratic transition, and that it should have taken radical and uncompromising steps towards disempowering the networks of the old regime and consolidating its own power.[13]

Despite having reached such radical diagnoses, research subjects notably did not evince any behavioural change when it came to violent extremism. Throughout the long winter during which their party-movement was repressed as (almost) never before, they demonstrated uniformity in foregoing any engagement with violent extremism inside of Egypt. Such constancy in outcome is confounding and theoretically pertinent for any number of reasons, the most significant being subjects' expressed sympathies for what might be considered extremist politics, their evincing of warning signs thought to be associated with radicalisation, and the fact that all parties had recourse to joining any number of locally operating jihadist organisations.

Behavioural choices were necessarily informed by a plurality of inputs. The personal testimonies of the principals nevertheless make clear that that the state's hard interventions played a major role in driving them away from this form of political expression. Most saliently, subjects pointed to the power disparity structuring the contest between jihadist challengers and the state as constituting a strong, personal disincentive against engaging in violent extremism. Pass-through effects introduced by the security forces' willingness to practice collective punishment against the intimates and communities of state enemies—including social rejection and being disowned from one's family—represented a disincentive as well.[14] Equally important, foreknowledge that MB leadership would likely offer no support for a violent campaign—a fact that was itself informed by the state's superiority in arms—was also seen to dissuade principals. MB leadership circa 2013–2014 was broadly aligned in the learned belief that military confrontation with the regime would bring an end to their organisation.[15] With no material assistance forthcoming from the organisation itself—be it in the form of funding for arms' purchases or insurance policies for the dependents of those who might prospectively be martyred—a turn to violent extremism was rendered tactically, strategically and personally non-viable for a vast majority of those interviewed and analysed.[16] In the end, as would be pithily summed up by one of our interlocutors: "It is not that they do not want [to engage in violence], it is that they cannot."[17]

Validation for hard intervention's potential short-term efficacy can also be found in our case study of the Jordanian national theatre. There, a combination of juridical containment and intelligence-based repression blocked aspirants from laying down the institutional plumbing necessary to sustain organisational activity across time. Key in these regards were pre-emptive actions, ideological honeypotting most especially, designed to disrupt recruitment pipelines. This tact was put into motion through the state's quiet enlistment of jihadist clerics Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filastini, and Iyab al-Qunaybi, whose online communications were used to lure potential adherents into the webs of the mukhabarat. As in Egypt, pressures were also applied to kin networks to ensure the isolation and stigmatisation of those who did engage in violent extremism.

By dint of both interventions and the regime's turning of a blind eye to violent extremism conducted abroad, the social and material foundations required to stage a significant insurgency inside Jordan were never established.[18] It would be ahistorical, of course, to posit that this configuration of security-led interventions either prevented the occurrence of violent extremism

inside Jordan altogether, or that they alone reduced the frequency and intensity of domestic attacks. Nevertheless, that these measures contributed to Jordan's capacity to maintain a Janus-faced existence in recent years—as a country both relatively free of violent extremism at home and exporting more jihadists per capita than virtually any other[19] - is beyond dispute.

Seen in conjunction, our case studies testify to hard interventions' potential short-term efficacy in lowering the probability of violent extremism occurrence. As mentioned earlier, however, it should be stressed that the Egyptian case in particular also affirms the possibility that such measures may ultimately generate the opposite effect in the medium to long term. Indeed, there are ample grounds for thinking that the repressive conditions which our sample cited as a disincentive for engaging in violent extremism contributed, at a population level, to the resumption of jihadist violence that was witnessed in the post-2013 years.[20] Such a causality, after all, would be keeping with the robust, long-term association that state and non-state violence evince in the MENA region.[21] We may therefore tentatively induce the following synthetic proposition on hard interventions and violent extremism: the probability of violent extremism's non-occurrence may be raised through the state's administering of hard interventions. The valence and magnitude of hard interventions' effects on violent extremism, however, are likely to be subject to time variance.

Availability of Credible Ideological Alternatives

Data furnished through our case studies points to the possibility that nonengagement with organised violent extremism is impacted by the availability of credible ideological counterweights within radicalised sub-populations as well. Credibility being the operative word, our evidence suggests that the efficacy of these counterweights hinged upon their having emerged organically within the radical milieu. One should, of course, be hesitant in assigning the ideological plan undue causal power. An emerging scholarly consensus on counternarratives' efficacy (or lack thereof) in reducing violent extremism gives reason for tempering the extent of our claim-making.[22] Nevertheless, the balance of evidence presented suggests that within the context of our case studies, the counterweights in question played a non-negligible role in subjects' nonengagement in violent extremism.

As was the case with our previous hypothesis, this one too was derived from examination of our Egyptian and Jordanian cases. In Egypt, two factors were observed to have coalesced in powering an ideological current that, though radical in its nature, nevertheless ran counter to the project of violent extremism generally and the appeal of Salafi jihadism specifically. The first was research subjects' exposure to and borrowing from secular discourses of revolution. A legacy of the crucible that was the years of the Arab uprisings, the radical cohort of Islamist youth that comprise our sample spent extensive time in the trenches alongside Egypt's leftist vanguard. By virtue of these experiences of solidarity, mutual learning, and collective struggle, processes of epistemic cross-fertilisation were catalysed. To begin, subjects were brought in contact with the theories and praxes then orienting their comrades' engagement with the historical moment. Having lined up most closely with the Revolutionary Socialists and the April 6th Movement, the young Muslim Brothers would encounter a particularly diverse medley of 20th century thinkers—stretching from the grand nonviolent strategists (Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.) to the leading lights of the anti-colonial push (Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon).

After together observing the conflicts that would set the course of the transitional period, this same Islamist cohort also came to restructure the syntax of their political hermeneutics upon an edifice grounded in leftist thought: the dyad of revolution and counterrevolution.

According to research subjects' testimony, the consequence of these processes, epistemically and behaviourally, proved significant. First, they mediated how research subjects named enemy and ally: rejecting the austere and Manichean logic propagated by contemporary jihadism, principals assigned positioning within ingroups and outgroups on the basis of neither faith nor the adoption of a particular orthodoxy, but of one's relation to the regime and fidelity to the project of revolution. Materially, this disqualified the possibility of their adherence to takfiri principles and, by extension, alienated research subjects from the main organs of violent extremism in Egypt. The same processes of epistemic sharing also equipped research subjects to make sense of post-2011 antinomies in a manner that would drive them even further from violent extremism. Able to see the logic of events outside the reductivist lens of religion, subjects showed themselves able to evaluate individuals, groups, and social forces with a nuance that rendered non-discriminating violence equally absurd and impractical: deeming Coptic Christian communities and institutions problematic by dint of their having lined up behind the counterrevolution, after all, entailed a far different prescription than deeming them problematic by dint of indelible ascriptive characteristics.

Beyond effects rendered by cohabitation with the Egyptian left, there is evidence to posit that research subjects were also pushed away from violent extremism by lines of argumentation advanced from within, to wit, from claims put forward inside Brotherhood-world during the tumultuous post-2013 years. Most salient here was a document produced by a committee of scholars entitled The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup (henceforth Jurisprudence). Jurisprudence does not, as a general matter, disqualify violence's legitimacy as a political tactic. It also does not rule out the utility that anti-state violence could present to Egypt at its current juncture.

That said, the treatise does articulate what might be called defensive and highly circumscribed rules of engagement by carving out an exception for acts undertaken against members of the security forces that are personally engaged in attacks on civilians under the principle of self-defence. This is also known as the right to "repel the assailant", as it is expressed in Islamic legal theory. The authors thus implicitly reinforce the rule of a wider prohibition against violence, and exclude the use of group markers or associations in delineating targets. It is not by virtue of being a police officer that someone becomes eligible to be attacked, but by virtue of the act that this actor specifically carries out. For the radical cohort at the heart of our case study, exposure to these ideas imposed another set of limits on the application of violence to the ones already set through their engagement with leftist political theory. In view of the less discriminatory approaches adopted by active jihadist organisations inside Egypt, the consequence was to effectively take the option of violent extremism off the table.

The availability of credible ideological alternatives' possible effect on the non-occurrence of violent extremism finds tentative confirmation in our Jordanian case study. There, recall that the state discreetly requisitioned several jihadist ideologues for the official purpose of contesting the doctrines being put forth by the Islamic State, and the unofficial one of drawing jihadist sympathisers into the light of day. Due to the considerable credibility that Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filastini, and Iyab al-Qunaybi retained within the jihadist milieu at

the time, evidence gathered during our case study suggests their stage-managed appeals may have influenced a significant number of prospective recruits to turn away from participation in violent extremism. This is not altogether surprising, as myriad outside findings establish that charismatic ideologues, so long as they possess the requisite reputational capital, can exert significant effects in both pulling people in and pushing people away from violent extremism.[23] At the time of writing, the balance of evidence suggests that the Jordanian regime's shift from passively managing the domestic religious space to actively shaping it through the creation of an 'official Islam' has contributed to maintaining regime dominance.[24]

Opting Out of the Economy of Violent Extremism

The third variable that our case studies suggest may have a causal effect on nonengagement with organised violent extremism within enabling environments is a community's ability to opt out of the economy of violent extremism. Mechanistically, this can, on the one hand, be attributed to how a community's higher endowments of financial and human capital reduce its need to engage with the conflict economy. On the other hand, it looks to stem from a high-endowment community's weaker attachments to group identities as well as from the praxes of peaceful dispute resolution they develop. Both claims find corroboration in the wider literature, which has established that a community's experience with relative deprivation and material insecurity can precipitate identity crises amongst community membership, one effect of which can be to raise relevant persons' susceptibility to terrorist recruitment.[25]

These claims are derived from a quasi-natural experiment conducted by our team as part of our Syrian case study. Centred geographically upon the Deir ez-Zor governorate of the country's northeast, the natural experiment in question was set in motion due to the Deir ez-Zor's encountering of a tragic upsurge in jihadist activity from 2014 onward. The causa proxima for this upsurge was the expansive campaign that the Islamic State launched against the Assad regime and the Free Syrian Army. As result, myriad Salafi jihadist organisations bidding for hegemony both within Syria and the wider MENA region consolidated relatively durable positions within Deir ez-Zor. In the face of such an environment, social groups and communities indigenous to Deir ez-Zor would need to determine if and how they would engage the new power brokers in their midst.

Due to the vagaries of social history and decades of cynical policy choices instituted by the Ba'ath party, the tribe has long been consolidated as the dominant form of collective organisation in Deir ez-Zor. Come the 2010s, two particular tribal federations—the Ageidat and the Baggara—would therefore be the ones on the ground facing the dilemma of how to deal with the ascendant jihadist forces. For any number of reasons—ideological affinity, commercial interests, the need for security, or the desire to settle old scores, to name but a few—the tribal federations themselves as well as nearly all their constituent members ultimately decided to build relations with the relevant jihadist elements. Doing so took the form of pledging allegiance to one organisation or another (often on a highly conditional basis), reaching accommodations whereby the organisations in question could more easily conduct operations in the area, or establishing more short-term and transactional arrangements. Factions from the Shaitat, Bukamal, and Gur'an clans, for instance, all established early alliances with Jabhat al-Nusra, granting the latter's Sharia Committee temporary control over the management of local oil and gas resources. The tribal groupings and municipalities that wound up deprived from Jabhat al-Nusra's distribution of the spoils—including the Mishrif of the Bkair tribe, the city of Bu-

sayra, and the village of Zirr—meanwhile, reacted by affiliating themselves with the Islamic State. Only one village of significance in Deir ez-Zor went against this local grain so to retain full independence from Salafi jihadism for the duration of the post-2014 years: Swedan.

At the most reductive level, this outlier outcome can be attributed to causalities stemming from Swedan's unique economic situation. Located seventy kilometres southeast of the city of Deir ez-Zor, the village and its inhabitants had long benefited from reliable remittance flows issued forth from the Gulf. Amid a governorate otherwise ravaged by some of Syria's highest rates of poverty, Swedan achieved a quality of life sufficient to earn the local epithet of "Dubai." Beyond financing the village's expanding physical environment, the wealth Swedan accumulated through remittances would also be leveraged to educate younger generations to a degree well in excess of their regional peers.

The knock-on effects of Swedan's prosperity proved of profound import upon the arrival of the Salafi jihadists. Critically, the jump in the village's human capital endowment which resulted from education investments—evinced in families' relatively high numbers of doctors, engineers, and high-skill professionals—would, in conjunction with the regular receipt of financial flows sent from the GCC countries, afford the village the luxury of opting out of the contests over Deir ez-Zor's hydrocarbon assets. The welfare of Swedan's people, after all, could be sustained without access to a share of the prospective revenues generated by oil and gas extraction. With those contests having become mediated via the deals relevant parties are able to establish with different men in arms, this luxury meant Swedan faced no material imperative for engaging with the Salafi jihadists.

The existence of particular norms and praxes within Swedan—the origins of which may also trace back to the village's relative prosperity—also appear to have exerted a causal effect vis-a-vis the non-occurrence of violent extremism. Due to the Ba'ath party's strategy of indirect governance in Deir ez-Zor that was mentioned earlier, tribes had for decades been empowered to administer their own systems of justice. As most were doing so within a context defined by rampant poverty, the governorate unsurprisingly witnessed violence come to imbricate processes of dispute resolution. This was not the case in Swedan, however, perhaps as a result of the stakes being a bit lower due to the claimants being a bit less desperate. There, traditions of conflict de-escalation and peaceful adjudication prevailed, and there, the obligations imposed by tribal identity—the need to unconditionally support one's fellow tribe member if a dispute emerged—were much weaker.

Seen in full, then, Swedan was to be the beneficiary of two sociocultural variables when forced to reckon with the exigency of Salafi jihadism. On the one hand, the village could lean on a shared habitus and the presence of relatively robust socio-legal mechanisms when it came to resolving internal disputes, respectively, both of which worked to draw residents away from the fray of violent extremism. On the other, though a tribal coalition tied into the struggles of the Salafi jihadist organisations in Deir ez-Zur, Swedan and its denizens were largely immune to the kinds of the identity-based pressures which might have compelled them to rally to the side of their in-group members at any cost.

Though potentially derivative of the village's relative wealth, each of these properties of social and cultural life in Swedan made a significant contribution to the non-occurrence of violent extremism in the village. As one notable put it, "we did not need to ally with anyone to take

revenge, [and] we did not need the oil."[26] Together, these mechanisms inform why places like Swedan may observe little participation in violent extremism despite being based in a highly enabling environment.

Rethinking What Violent Extremism Is

We identified three meso-level variables in the preceding section which appear to reduce the probability of violent extremism occurring in enabling environments. Though in need of further testing, we believe our findings can provide purchase on the configuration of factors that explain why a person or community encountering trying conditions may prove resilient to violent extremism.

Important though these insights could prove to be, they do beg another question: is there an element of the enabling environment which might render the effects of our meso-level moot if taken out of the equation? To wit, is there a particular element in the enabling environment without which violent extremism will not occur at a scale sufficient to disrupt the basic functionality of societies and challenge the sovereign authority of states—an element whose removal would therefore make variables like credible ideological alternatives less consequential? If so, what might this teach us about the animating properties of more existential forms of violent extremism?

There is strong empirical evidence to suggest that there is, in fact, a single, localised element in the enabling environment whose absence alone suffices to predict significant declines in violent extremism within the MENA region: active terrorist organisations. The veracity of this claim can be validated through a fairly simple longitudinal analysis. Between 2002 and 2019, more than 96,000 people in the MENA region lost their lives directly because of non-state terrorism, which we will take as a proxy output of violent extremism of the more existential variety. The following year, however, deaths attributable to non-state terrorism dropped by nearly 80 per cent as compared to the annual average of the period in question, reaching levels not seen since before the American invasion of Iraq. In 2021, regional fatalities fell further, totalling just 1,139.[27]

In searching for what might explain this decline, it becomes clear that it cannot be attributed to any of the structural variables typically referenced as the causae ultimae of violent extremism. There were, of course, no governance-related improvements instituted in the MENA region post-2019. To the contrary, both the administrative performance and perceived legitimacy of regional governments have, almost without exception, tracked sharply downward for more than a decade running, as World Bank Governance Indicators and successive waves of the Arab Barometer attest. Nor, for that matter, has there been any course correction when it came to inequality and impoverishment trends, which have only pushed further into the global extremes in recent times.[28] Clearly, it is not as if the abusiveness of police and domestic intelligence forces has suddenly ceased either. A superficial review can also rule out the relative disappearance of violent extremism being imputable to other "population" level variables. Intergroup tensions—whether along ethnic, sectarian, or ideological cleavages—have hardly eased since 2019.

Though certain channels for extremist proselytising have been obstructed, the discursive archive of Salafi jihadism is still readily available to any who seek it. Mental health is in a far worse

state than at any point in recent memory—riddled by the effects of lockdowns and isolation, unexpected family losses, growing economic precarity, and profound life course disruption.[29] At the same time, modalities of socialisation thought to both cohere individuals within positive community and instil nonexclusive social identities have only grown more brittle due to regimes' incessant attacks on civil society.

In a context defined by mass disaffection and isolation, then, the claim that there might somehow be fewer people drawn to the jihadism's clarion call strikes as fanciful. Indeed, the current impasse in the MENA region seems uniquely propitious for those who traffic in the balms of moral certainty and promises of dignity and righteous collectivism. All of which is to say that there is little in the way of empirics from which one could trace violent extremism's decline to an improvement in environmental conditions, or to changes more generally affecting MENA populations. The drivers of the phenomenon's diminishing output must, then, lie elsewhere.

As intimated, simple chronology gives good reason for thinking that elsewhere is in the incapacitation of leading Salafist jihadist organisations. The end of 2017 saw the Islamic State relinquish what remained of its territorial holdings in Iraq. By March 2019, the organisation would lose its remaining positions in Syria as well. Though these defeats did not mark the end of the Islamic State's existence as an institutional entity—the group is estimated to retain manpower of around 10,000 soldiers plus those mobilised by foreign affiliates[30]—they did coincide with a distinct weakening in operational capacity. As of the closing moments of the last decade, the Islamic State had lost most of its experienced field commanders, and the ranks of its political leadership had thinned considerably.[31] The organisation's leading rival within the Salafi jihadist trend in Syria, meanwhile, fell upon similarly difficult times starting in 2018. Facing political headwinds in addition to attrition, Hay'at al-Tahrir al-Sham has demonstrated little ability to project force beyond a few enclaves since before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2. Finally, if still a menace in West and East Africa, al Qaeda Central too has shown itself incapable of opening a durable front within the MENA and at the time of writing, four months after the liquidation of Ayman al-Zawahiri, no successor has been announced by the organisation.

Synthesised into a single frame, the data on *actually existing* violent extremism in the contemporary MENA region present the following record: in material output, violent extremism tailed off significantly starting at the end of 2019. Concurrent with this tailing off was a reduction in the operational capacity of the leading Salafi jihadist organisations in the region. Also concurrent with this tailing off was a worsening of political, sociological, and economic conditions hitherto considered conducive to (if not causal of) violent extremism. On the one hand, then, we observe neither an association between the activity of Salafi jihadists and dynamics affecting populations at large, nor one between dynamics affecting populations at large and incidents of violent extremism. On the other, we observe a robust association between incidents of violent extremism and the operational capacity of Salafi jihadists.

This coalescence of facts has significant implications. They suggest that Salafi jihadism—in its provenance, ability to act, and ability to self-perpetuate—abides by a logic that is largely independent from the dynamics shaping the conditions of social life in the societies where it nests. As it is Salafi jihadism which evinces a strong causal relation with violent extremism, moreover, they also suggest that violent extremism is, necessarily, not *of* those societies. Put differently, the data indicate that violent extremism is less a sociological phenomenon that naturally emanates from a population upon the onset of particular conditions than it is a manifestation of

contingent and expressly political processes involving a far narrower cast of characters. Conceptually, this demands we rethink what, exactly, violent extremism of the existential variety is, and who, precisely, constitutes its primary subject.

Notwithstanding its confused etiology, the conceptualisation of violent extremism was thrust into the lexicon to capture something held to be new, distinct, and, at its core, *popular*: namely, the cultural, social, and ideological processes through which segments of Europe's Muslim community—bound into a singular category by loose and ascriptive properties—were alleged to be radicalised into animating what was viewed as "homegrown" Islamist terrorism during the early 2000s.[32] Then as now, this conceptualisation failed to identify or encapsulate dynamics salient to the MENA (if not more broadly). Far from the diffuse and apolitical processes just described, violent extremism–cum-terrorism in the MENA is, and only ever has been, an unambiguously political phenomenon. Terrorist organisations themselves of course demonstrate purposefulness, rationality—in the sense that operations follow a means-end schema, however convoluted—and unambiguous politics, evincing intentions and tactics centred on inducing changes to the policies or composition of existing states or, in the case of IS, on establishing a new state. More than that, their very being is and always has been imbricated by the state and interstate relations. It is states that furnish these organisations them their raison d'être, transmit or train their personnel, bolster their resource mobilisation capacity, patronise their efforts, or propel them across time through the dialectics of countering and causing violent extremism.[33]

This being the case, should violent extremism be retained and applied as concept in the MENA at all, it is our contention that it needs to be reformulated. Though running the risk of creating a conceptual redundancy, we would propose that violent extremism narrowly refers to a tactic and/or modality of violent political expression, one whose practice and/or activation at a more mass level requires the prior presence of a terrorist organisation. By extension, we would also propose that the principal subjects of violent extremism—the agents of the phenomenon—be reduced to terrorist organisations alone, whose formal and informal networks include organic intellectuals and jihadist ideologues, so-called lone actors, and sympathisers.

For researchers, accepting these conceptual shifts would imply a major change in investigative priorities. Instead of centring one's problem upon the places and communities where violent extremism is observed, the task would be to hone in on the phenomenon's main protagonists: terrorist organisations and their leadership. To the extent these organisations are political creatures through and through, doing so would first and foremost require the return of politics to the place it once occupied (circa the post-colonial period) for students of political violence.[34] To the extent that the state and matters of interstate relations indeed imbricate and impel terrorist organisations, doing so would also require bringing the state back in to the study of violent extremism in a big way.

Difficult as the adoption of such a bold shift in priorities would be, we believe the payoff would ultimately exceed the costs. Allowing real analytical traction to be established on one of the "wicked policy problems" of the contemporary era, it might even pave the way for the arrival of state interventions at once efficacious and limited in the negative externalities and collateral damage they engender.[35]

Conclusions

Regardless of how one might conceptualise it, it would be difficult to contest that violent extremism has proven an enormously destructive phenomenon. Beyond the harrowing body count referenced in the previous section, economic losses incurred directly or indirectly as result of violent extremism were estimated in excess of $62 billion for 2016 alone.[36] There is also the utility that violent extremism has afforded political entrepreneurs of varied ideological stripes to consider: just as the construction of immigration crises can prime voters to seek out particular kinds of solutions (and particular kinds of representatives), leveraging the threat of violent extremism has allowed certain public policy concerns to be marginalised and others promoted while simultaneously opening the space for hitherto unthinkable kinds of electoral appeal.[37]

If violent extremism itself represents a rather clear and present danger—particularly in parts of the global south—so too do many of the efforts that have been summoned by governments for the nominal purposes of countering and/or preventing it. Preventative actions (PVE) are particularly troubling in these regards. Premised upon legal ambiguities, targeted at mass publics, designed to contest the theatre of ideology, and mandating authorities to intervene prior to any illegality having occurred, PVE has to date endowed an exceedingly corrosive legacy.[38] There is little reason, moreover, for thinking this legacy won't grow even worse in the years ahead.

Given the stakes and the real-world impacts, it is critical that scholars continue to develop knowledge around what violent extremism is, why it manifests, and how one might best push back against it. It was our intention that this article might contribute in these regards. In inducing three meso-level variables that might explain why violent extremism does *not* occur within particular enabling environments, we hope to have encouraged colleagues to question the validity of some of the causal claims—both macro and micro—which have long pervaded this field of study. As a second-order effect, we hope we might also encourage those working in the policy space to stop administering initiatives built upon faulty bases. More constructively, in positing a few changes to how violent extremism is conceived and in proposing that terrorist organisations be considered the phenomenon's primary subjects, we hope to have laid the case for why future interventions against violent extremism, should they be pursued, need to be far more discrete and narrow both in targets and ends.

The explanatory power of our study is, of course, limited by some of the data collection challenges discussed in the introduction. Our findings may be swayed by biases employed in the case selection process. We have, after all, "selected on the dependent variable", and in choosing cases based strictly on the observation of violent extremism non-occurrence, we limit the extent to which ceteris paribus causal effects can be attributed to the independent variables foregrounded in our study. This being the case, our propositions constitute hypotheses in need of further testing more than they do conclusive theoretical claims. For those potentially who might be interested in validating, refining, or falsifying these hypotheses, natural experiments and carefully designed comparative analyses likely offer the best means of going about such work. Fruitful as well might be studies aimed at determining the precise point at which the valence of hard security interventions' effects on violent extremism reverse. Studies that could assemble more control variables—so as to better isolate the potential mediating effect which we have attributed to the availability of ideological alternatives within the extremism milieu

and the opportunity to opt out of the conflict economy—would naturally be of great use, too.

As a new era of great power contests looks to be upon us, it is reasonable to anticipate that violent extremism and terrorism may command less attention from social scientists in the years ahead. This would be a disappointing and potentially costly outcome should it come to pass. Both violent extremism and those policies that are created to deal with it are certain, after all, to remain deeply salient to the lives of millions for a long time to come. Let us hope the field does not go the way of the fad, and that better empirics, better conceptualisation, and better theorisation are still ahead of us.

Colin Powers is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for International Studies (CERI), Sciences Po and the Chief Editor of the Noria Research MENA Program. In addition to his work on political violence, his research mostly concerns the political economy of underdevelopment and authoritarianism in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa.

Erik Skare is a researcher at the Department of Culture Studies and Orient Languages (IKOS) at the University of Oslo and an associate researcher at the Center for International Studies (CERI) at Sciences Po, Paris. He is the author of "A History of Palestinian Islamic Jihad" (Cambridge University Press, 2021) and "Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Islamist Writings on Resistance and Religion" (I.B. Tauris, 2021).

Georges Fahmi is research fellow at the Middle East Directions Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institution as well as an associate fellow at Chatham House. His research focuses on religious actors in democratic transitions in the Middle East.

Nouran Ahmed is a researcher at the Law & Society Research Unit of the American University in Cairo. Her research primarily concerns political violence and processes of radicalisation.

Ahmed Mhidi is a Syria-focused researcher and consultant for Humanitarian Dialogue. His work has been published in many outlets, including Foreign Affairs.

Myriam Ababsa is a social geographer based in Jordan and an associate researcher at the French Institute for the Near-East (IFPO). She earned her PhD from the University François Rabelais of Tours. Her current work focuses on the impact of public policies on regional and urban development in Jordan and Syria.

Olivier Roy is currently joint-chair at the RSCAS and SPS department of the European University Institute, and adjunct professor at the EUI School of Transnational Governance. He is the author, among other books, of Globalized Islam (Columbia University Press) and Holy Ignorance (Oxford UP). He is presently working on Islamic norms in the public sphere.

Endnotes

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9 As concerns research methods, team members deployed a mixed-methods approach combining historical process tracing, discourse analysis of primary documents, and open-ended interviews with parties of relevant populations.

10 Inclusion in our study was determined by individuals having participated in the Islamist popular mobilization after 2013. Researchers followed the trajectories of 50 Islamists who were part of this mobilization after 2013 but remained nonviolent throughout. The trajectories of principals were then probed through semi-structured interviews, consultation with relevant legal representatives, and review of open source materials. Subjects were drawn from a representative sample of the Islamist milieu: Our study included persons of differing class, educational, and geographical backgrounds.

11 These mechanisms are connected in that disincentivization at the individual level is partially effectuated through policies and practices designated for the purpose of degrading the organization. By degrading the capacity of organizational outlets, after all, interventions also reconfigure the matrix of cost, benefit and opportunity which together structure a relevant individual's decision-making.

12 See for example Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

13 These locally operating groups include Wilayat Sina', Hasam, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, Ajnad Misr, Revolutionary Punishment, Popular Resistance Movement, and Liwa' al-Thawra.

14 Though not yet active in violent extremism, one subject detailed being rejected by a part of his family for having been imprisoned through the state's dragnet. On the popular front, Islamists' denial of access to the neighborhoods where they grew up during protest marches can only have had a deeply chastening effect. See: Salih Ramadan, "al-Ahālī yuʿlinūn al-nafīr al-ʿām ḍidd 'al-maḥẓūra'.. wa qarār shaʿbī bi-tahjīr al-ikhwān min 'al-manṣūra'," *al-Watan* (December 26, 2013), https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/380065.

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about the collapse of the MB in the 1960s. They had also observed the experiences of those Islamist groups which tried to challenge the Mubarak regime in the 1980s and 1990s—such as Jama'a Islamiya and al-Jihad—and witnessed what happened to their fellow Brothers in Hama, Syria in the 1980s.

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20 See: Marco Pinfari, "Egypt Country Report," in: Corinne Torrekens and Daphne de la Vigne (Eds.), *Connekt Country Reports* (2020): 8–9

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About

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Contact

E: pt.editor@icct.nl
W: pt.icct.nl