

Countering Violent Extremism with Governance Networks

by Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen

Abstract

It is often noted that one-size-fits all solutions are unlikely to work when it comes to countering violent extremism. This article argues that central government needs multiple, diverse local and civil society partners to mobilize the knowledge and resources needed to differentiate from case to case. It suggests that public administration research into governance networks offers a useful lens on the practical challenges, limits, and opportunities of working against violent extremism in such a broad coalition of actors.

Keywords: CVE; radicalization; disengagement; networks.

Introduction: Unbalanced Discourses and Reactions to Terrorism

Scholars frequently point out that effective counterterrorism strategies balance disparate elements. Coercive measures to deter and contain threats need to be complemented by inclusive and preventive measures to reduce the appeal of extremist narratives. Policies aimed at combating the structural preconditions that fuel grievances, e.g. bad governance or socioeconomic inequalities, need to be supplemented by measures that target the problems and perceptions of the specific individuals who are flirting with extremism.[1] When it comes to these measures, it is commonly assumed by academics and analysts that one-size-fits-all approaches are unlikely to work. The individual variation in terms of causes, triggers, and trajectories of violent extremism is simply too wide.[2]

Nevertheless, political debates, particularly in the wake of terrorist attacks, tend to concentrate on punitive measures and on the role and responsibility of central government. These are important aspects of overall counterterrorism strategies. However, the challenge is that criminalization of an ever wider range of acts and expressions makes it difficult to differentiate from case to case. In effect, it reduces local actors' room for maneuver as they strive to target and tailor interventions to individual cases of extremism.[3] The result might well be suboptimal or directly counterproductive policies that inadvertently add to the problem of violent extremism they were intended to reduce.

In this article I argue for the need to deemphasize central government and punitive measures to the advantage of a networked, collaborative approach that includes local government, and civil society in efforts to counter violent extremism; A network is more likely to possess the necessary resources and expertise to tailor interventions to individual cases than any single agency of central government, no matter how competent the agency may be.

The article draws from a combination of insights generated within terrorism studies and public administration research. First, it outlines, in light of what we know about radicalization and disengagement, why sanctions-centered and one-size-fits-all approaches are suboptimal. Next, it introduces some basic points from public administration research on governance networks. It then discusses the advantages as well as the drawbacks of handling security challenges in a network, and concludes that a governance network is the least bad solution to the complex challenge of limiting recruitment into and expediting disengagement from violent extremism.

Radicalization or Exit from Violent Extremism? Sanctions Work both Ways

The policy and research interest in why and how people enter or exit violent extremism has grown enormously since a group of young British men attacked London's mass transit system in 2005.[4] The success of the so-called Islamic State in attracting thousands of foreign recruits to its cause has added further urgency to the quest for answers and countermeasures. Botched and successful attacks by solo-terrorists – whether inspired by militant Islamism or extreme right wing militancy – have added new questions, such as what is the role of social media, on-line identity communities and on-line propaganda with regard to radicalization? Violent attacks by apparently deeply troubled and unstable individuals have raised questions about how mental illness play into the decision to take violent action.

Some researchers have emphasized the role of structural factors, such as socioeconomic marginalization, stigmatization, and lack of opportunities in driving radicalization. Others have pointed to the presence of extremist narratives, offering meaning and direction to individuals in search of a cause. Others again have emphasized the active role of extremist networks and ideologues in spotting, reaching out to, and cultivating vulnerable individuals. Turning to the questions why individuals disengage from violent extremist groups and subcultures, there is also evidence of multiple factors and triggers. A comprehensive review falls beyond the confines of this article. In general, however, researchers tend to agree that the phenomena of entry into and exit from violent extremism are complex, dynamic, and multifaceted.[5]

One point, however, is crucial to the argument of this article: Stepping back and looking simultaneously at the evidence of the role of judicial, administrative, or social sanctions in radicalization processes and in disengagement processes, it appears that sanctions can work both ways.

I have argued elsewhere that measures, which in some cases help prompt an exit from violent extremism in other cases actually push an individual further towards an extremist group or mindset. Context, timing of countermeasures, and a set of individual factors play decisive roles.[6]

On one hand, for example, researchers have pointed out that some individuals are drawn towards violent extremism because it offers an effective way of provoking mainstream society and the parental generation. [7] In these cases, social sanctions and confrontational attempts to dissuade extremism by family members, mainstream religious figures, other establishment figures, or government authorities are likely to make things worse. On the other hand, studies of how individuals disengage from extremism show the importance of credible counter voices and persons outside the extremist environment, who care to engage in a critical dialogue and take a personal interest.[8] Obviously, the question of who would constitute a credible counter voice is individual and needs to be considered on a case by case basis. The point is that the effect of the same type of intervention can range from positive to negative, depending on individual circumstances.

Researchers have also pointed out that coming down hard on extremism might cause groups to splinter and segments to radicalize further, while feeding into extremist narratives about persecuted minorities and a repressive state.[9] However, at the same time case studies of disengagement indicate that the threat of judicial or administrative sanctions makes some individuals reconsider their extremist engagement.[10] For example, a case study by Ilardi shows how one former militant Islamist reacted with the conclusion that “this is not for me” to the fact that other militants were being put on trial.[11] And in a case study by Olsen, a former left wing militant explains how he got out because of fear that his friends or family might come under scrutiny by police or intelligence services.[12] Serving time in prison might likewise work both ways. Whereas prisons are widely identified as a setting where individuals are dislocated and potentially vulnerable to extremist influences, studies have also indicated how prison terms allowed time for convicted extremists to reflect, nuance, and reconsider their opinions.[13]

In sum, judicial, administrative or social sanctions might reduce or intensify the extremist engagement of targeted individuals, depending on context, timing, and individual circumstances. Thus, one-size-fits-all solutions are likely to produce suboptimal results.

An Alternative to Centralized Efforts: Countering Violent Extremism with Governance Networks

How could the responsible government agencies mobilize the necessary resources, insights, and expertise to tailor and individualize interventions to prevent violent extremism?

Research on how local communities act to prevent, contain, and bounce back from violent extremism have begun to map the broad variety of actors that play a role, including local police, social workers, schools, families, local businesses, voluntary associations, and religious associations. When such actors manage to come together in trust-based networks, they are able to mobilize a range of useful skills and resources ranging from providing someone with a job to offering religious counselling.[14]

The challenge of coping with complex problems in cooperation with disparate actors is not unique to the field of national and societal security. Public administration research has shown similar challenges across from a range of public policy areas including health, environmental protection, infrastructure development – areas where government agencies need to work with multiple stakeholders to reach sustainable solutions – and offered the concept of governance network as a lens through which central agencies might try to understand, navigate, and manage such collaborations.[15] Governance networks cannot be steered from one single center, as they tend to be informal and based on voluntary participation; They challenge the classical notion of hierarchical control. Instead, they depend critically on trust and on the abilities of the involved actors to coordinate their perceptions and activities, to solve problems collaboratively, and learn as they go along. [16] Network governance of complex challenges requires patient, diplomatic, persistent efforts to approach a common understanding of the nature of causes behind and possible solutions to the problem at hand.

When it comes to countering violent extremism, efforts to build governance networks are likely to be particularly challenging in societies that are already struggling with the polarization and lack of societal trust engendered by terrorist attacks, extremist propaganda, and possibly hard-handed government responses. Working in a network is likely to be frustratingly slow, tedious, and muddy to law enforcement personnel or social workers, eager to create and show results – at least initially in the process of building trust and iterating ahead towards workable collaboration patterns and intervention methods.

It is also going to require great courage on part of decision makers in politics and in national security bureaucracies to delegate authority and decision making power to local and front line actors, trusting them to make the right judgement calls about how to treat individual cases of radicalization. It is not difficult to imagine the kind of dilemmas that might arise: For example, having incomplete knowledge about the disposition and intentions of a returnee from the conflict in Syria/Iraq, do you hand it over to local actors to attempt to rehabilitate the returnee? Or do you opt for applying the power of central government to surveil, disrupt, and investigate/prosecute? Even if historical evidence from previous conflicts that attracted foreign fighters indicates, that few returnees become terrorists, you might want to err on the side of precaution, even if that is expensive and risks leaving individuals stuck in extremist networks that they might actually prefer to leave.

In sum, countering violent extremism with governance networks is no easy solution. However, it offers the best hope of matching the complexity and dynamism of the phenomenon of violent extremism via a broad alliance of actors who, in between them, are much more likely to be able to intervene effectively to counter individual cases of violent extremism than any one single government agency acting on its own.

Conclusion

The public and political inclination to demand strong and decisive countermeasures by the state is understandable when a democracy is faced with a growing threat from terrorism. Analysts have noted the danger of self-defeating policies in which liberty and fundamental freedoms are jettisoned in a climate of fear, in turn fueling extremist narratives about a repressive state.[17] In this article, I have argued that there are additional reasons why “strong” policies, designed to protect citizens of democratic states against violent extremism, might defeat their purpose. The variety and complexity of the factors that causes individuals to engage with or disengage from violent extremism are too great. Sanctions that makes some individuals back away from violent extremism could easily lead others to intensify their extremist engagement.

A classical, punitive, state-centric approach to counterterrorism complicates efforts to differentiate on a case to case basis.

A networked governance approach to counter violent extremism is no easy solution. It is less manageable from a classical executive point of view, and possibly less psychologically satisfactory to politicians who want to display strong action. However, it offers the best chance at mobilizing the necessary resources, skills, and competencies to individualize interventions, counter the appeal of violent extremism, and induce individual disengagement from extremist networks.

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Notes

[1] Crelinstein, Ronald. (2014). Perspectives on Counterterrorism: From Stovepipes to a Comprehensive Approach. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8 (1), pp. 2-15; Cronin, Audrey Kurt & Ludes, James (Eds.) (2004). *Attacking Terrorism. Elements of a Grand Strategy*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

[2] Neumann, Peter R. (Ed.). (2015). *Radicalization. Vol IV. De- and Counter-radicalization*. London: Routledge.

[3] Moreover, the danger of jettisoning core democratic values and polarizing societies along ethnic and religious lines has been noted by many, e.g. Donohue, Laura K. (2008). *The Cost of Counterterrorism. Power, Politics, and Liberty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[4] See Alex P. Schmid and David C. Hoffmann, pp. 61-91 in: Schmid, A. P. *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review. The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 4, no. 2 (2013). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2013.1.02>

[5] Neumann, Peter R., (Ed.). (2015). *Radicalization: Major Works Collection*, Volume I-IV. Routledge; Bjoergo, Tore. (Ed.) (2005). *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and the Way Forward*. London: Routledge; Önnersfors, Andreas & Steiner, Kristian (Eds.) (forthcoming 2017). *Expressions of Radicalization: Global Politics, Processes and Practices*. London: Palgrave; Ranstorp, Magnus, (Ed.) (2010). *Understanding Violent Radicalism: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe*. New York: Routledge; Sageman, Marc. (2008). *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

[6] This paragraph has been adapted from Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen (forthcoming 2017) Patterns of Disengagement from Violent Extremism: A Stocktaking of Current Knowledge and Implications for Counterterrorism. *Expressions of Radicalization: Global Politics, Processes and Practices*. Andreas Önnersfors & Kristian Steiner (Eds.). London: Palgrave.

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[8] Aho, James Alfred. (1994). *This Thing of Darkness: A Sociology of the Enemy*. Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, p. 130; Arnstberg, Karl-Olov & Hällén, Jonas. (2000). *Smaka känga: vägen tillbaka. Intervjuer med avhoppade nynazister*. Stockholm: Scandia, p. 39; Demant, Froukje et al. (2008). Decline and Disengagement: An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalisation. Amsterdam: IMES, pp. 128, 156; Ilardi, Gaetano Joe. (2013). Interviews with Canadian Radicals. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, p. 733; Olsen (see note 4 above), pp. 56, 69-70; Rommelspacher, Birgit. (2006). »Der Hass hat uns geeint«: Junge Rechtsextreme und ihr Ausstieg aus der Szene. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, p. 233.

[9] De Graaf, Beatrice & Malkki, Leena. (2010). Killing it Softly? Explaining the Early Demise of Left-Wing Terrorism in the Netherlands. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22, p. 631; Khosrokhavar, Farhad. (2006). Terrorism in Europe. *Terrorism and International Relations*. Hamilton, James D. (Ed.). Washington DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, p. 31.

[10] Arnstberg & Hällén, p. 37, 39; Bjoergo, Tore & Carlsson, Yngve. (2005). Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Studies, p. 26; Demant et al., op. cit., p. 156.

[11] Ilardi, op. Cit., p. 733.

[12] Olsen, op. Cit., p. 54.

[13] Neumann, Peter. (2010). *Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation in 15 Countries*. London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence.

[14] Dalgaard-Nielsen, Anja & Schack, Patrick. (Forthcoming, 2016). Community Resilience to Militant Islamism: Who and What? *Democracy and Security*; Weine, Stevan et al. (2013). Building Community Resilience to Counter Violent Extremism. *Democracy and Security*, 9 (4), pp. 327-222.

[15] Koppenjan, Joop & Klijn, Erik Hans. (2004). *Managing Uncertainties in Networks: Public Private Controversies*. London: Routledge.

[16] Idem, p. 230.

[17] See for example Jackson, Richard. (2007). The core commitments of critical terrorism studies. *European Political Science*, 6, pp. 244-251; Mueller, John E. (2006). *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them*. USA: Free Press; Wolfendale, Jessica. (2006). Terrorism, Security, and the Threat of Counterterrorism. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29, pp. 753-770.