

## Radicalism isn't the problem: it's the move to violence we need to counter

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Until 2007, I was living and teaching in Cairo and researching the history of terrorism. In 2007 I moved back to Europe, and since then I've been researching not so much radicalization as policies designed to prevent it, and the assumptions on which these are based. One problem that struck me immediately was that there was absolutely no consensus on what radicalization actually was, and not even on what "radical" meant. This may sound like an academic quibble—after all, it could be replied, we all know what's radical when we see it. But actually it isn't like that, as different people very clearly regard different things as radical. And that is a problem, as if we don't even know what it is that we are trying to counter, we are unlikely to be very successful in countering it, and we may even make things worse by trying to counter what it is counter-productive to counter.

### **European approaches to radicalism**

Understandings of radicalism vary a lot from country to country. Some countries define radicalism—or extremism, the words are generally used interchangeably—narrowly, in terms of supporting the use of violence. Other countries define it much more widely, sometimes even in terms that include intolerance within radicalism, as is the case with the current British Prevent strategy, which defines extremism as including "vocal or active opposition to ... mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs." We all agree that intolerance is generally a bad thing, of course, and it is also the case that a truly tolerant person could probably not be a terrorist – but intolerance is unfortunately a rather widespread phenomenon, and hard to counter.

One reason for this range of different definitions is that understandings of radicalism tend to expand. There are three main reasons for this. One of them is the absence of any precise definition of the term: there is no bottom line that can easily be referred to. A second reason is that once resources are available for counter-radicalization, people who wish to make use of those resources have an obvious interest in portraying whatever they are opposing, or proposing to oppose, as radical. A third and related reason is that when counter-radicalization tasks are given to people who are already engaged in some form of socially useful activity, they tend to incorporate counter-radicalization into whatever it is that they are already doing. In one European country—not Britain—counter-radicalization even expanded to include campaigns aimed against playground bullying and in favour of celebrating Constitution Day. These campaigns may well have been valuable in and of themselves, but can have contributed little to the ultimate objective of countering terrorism.

If part of the problem is the absence of any precise definition of radicalism, it might be argued that what is needed is a precise definition. It is likely, however, that the term is incapable of

precise definition, since it indicates a *degree* of something, but not what that something is. What is needed is further understanding of that something.

### **Range of options**

I'll start with two extreme positions, which are not problematic—what is problematic is the ground between them. At one extreme, everyone is agreed that there are certain activities that are not actually terrorism but are so close to it that they need to be stopped, such as running a jihadist website. At the other extreme, it is clear that terrorism always takes place against a background of attitudes, without which it could not occur. It is easier to identify the relevant background in retrospect, which is what I did when I was working on the history of terrorism. The anarchist terrorism at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, could not have occurred without there being an anarchist movement in the first place, and the anarchist movement was part of socialism. No socialism, no anarchism, no anarchist terrorism—and no Labour Party either, of course. So just as everyone is agreed that certain activities are threats that must be stopped, so most people who have studied the history of terrorism would agree that even though socialism in 1900 was both radical in the terms of that time *and* a cause of terrorism, the answer was not to try to counter the development of socialism—though some governments did try that, and of course failed, as it was simply too big a target, too big a trend.

The problem, then, is where to draw the line between these two extremes. What sort of activities and attitudes need to be countered, and can be countered? That seems to me a better question than asking what is radical.

### **What the problem really is**

Something that struck me in 2007 when I came back to Europe from Cairo was that many of the political and religious views that were regarded as radical in Europe were views that I encountered routinely in Cairo. It was generally accepted by most Egyptians, for example, that there was a clash of civilizations going on between Islam and the West. Strict, Saudi-inspired interpretations of Islam of the variety that are called Salafism were also quite normal

The narrative of the clash of civilizations is central to the milieu from which jihadist terrorism derives, and in which it finds support. It is today's equivalent of the socialism from which anarchist terrorism once derived. It is also a narrative that, in modified form, can inspire other sorts of terrorism, as anyone who read the *Manifesto* of Anders Behring Breivik will have seen. However, this narrative is not on its own enough to produce terrorism. Only a tiny percentage of the millions of Egyptians who accept this narrative have even thought for a minute that they personally should take an active part in the clash that they think is going on, and even fewer have actually done so. The blogs that promote the mirror version of the clash narrative that Breivik accepted attract a lot of traffic, but once again, there have been only a handful of cases of people actually *acting* on the basis of that narrative.

Similarly, Salafi interpretations of Islam are also central to the milieu from which jihadist terrorism derives, but only a tiny percentage of Salafis actually become involved in terrorism, and when they do, this probably has more to do with their acceptance of the clash of civilizations narrative and with other personal factors than it does with Salafism.

The problem is not the narrative or the Salafism, then, but the people who accept and promote the idea that violence is the proper response to the narrative. This is the something that needs to be countered.

Attempts to counter the clash of civilizations narrative or the rise of Salafism are not only doomed to failure but, as Dr Shterin has just demonstrated, risk proving counterproductive, and not only when the means used are as dramatic as those he described. Counter-radicalization efforts in one European country, again not Britain, targeted a Salafi mosque using a range of means from parking restrictions to fire regulations to discourage attendance there. If I were a Salafi attending that mosque, these measures would have convinced me of that government's hostility to Islam – and so of the clash of civilizations narrative.

### **More focus**

In conclusion, what we need is more focus on what it is that we are trying to counter. We need to recognize that the views and associated activities from which terrorism *might* arise are widespread, and that it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate them. Keep a watchful eye on relevant milieus, by all means, but discretely. We need to recognize that eliminating non-violent expressions of certain political, religious and ideological positions may actually make violent expression of those positions more likely, not less likely. In short, what we need to counter is violence.