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Issue Brief

Towards an Epistemic Understanding of Radicalism, Extremism and Terrorism

Adil Rasheed

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Summary

Without an international consensus on the definition of terrorism and associated terms, how effective could campaigns to fight the global scourge be? This question has dogged many counter-terrorism experts and academicians worldwide who have been steadily working towards building unanimity of views in defining terms such as fundamentalism, radicalism, violent extremism, hate attacks and terrorism. Properly identifying of people as fundamentalists and potential radicals is critical for preventing them from becoming violent extremists and terrorists.

The once-vaunted Global War on Terror (GWOT) and even the ongoing Global Programme on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) have often been criticised for being misnomers,[1] as some commentators aver that it is untenable to wage campaigns against abstract nouns like terrorism and extremism, particularly in the absence of any internationally recognised definition of such terms.[2]

The lack of international consensus over some of these fundamental terms of references severely impairs well-intentioned global counter-terrorism (CT) operations and sometimes even puts the effectiveness, if not legitimacy of several Counter Violent Extremism and Terrorism (CVET) campaigns to question. Terms associated with terrorism such as violent extremism, radicalism, or fundamentalism, are often used indiscriminately and at times interchangeably, not just in the popular media but even in academic literature. Often fundamentalists and non-violent radicals are equated with terrorists, which leads to legal complications. The persistence of such conceptual confusion impedes the development of effective CVET operations and programmes that need precise matrices to determine the threat and achieve quantifiable outcomes.

Various security experts and academicians globally have been working to build unanimity of views over universally accepted terms of reference in the intractable cognitive realm of violent extremism and terrorism.[3] Although much confusion still exists, this Brief seeks to provide information regarding the growing acceptance of definitions and understanding of important concepts.

Fundamentalism

The firm adherence to any belief system or religion by its followers is fraught with the danger of engendering fanaticism, bigotry and xenophobia in that community. In the modern age, religious zealotry has reacted mainly to the rise of modern science and secular philosophy and a technology-driven lifestyle.

The liberal and humanist ideals of equality, scientific reason and material progress have undermined religion’s erstwhile pre-eminence in social and political spheres and gradually marginalised institutions of traditional religious laws and learning. In reaction, religious revivalist forces emerged early in the 20th century as social and political movements to overcome the collapse of traditional religious authority. This new wave of religious reaction to the rise of a secular mode of living has been named fundamentalism.[4]

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[1] Jane Harman, **“Not a War on Terror, a War on Ideology”**, Wilson Center, 17 September 2014.

[2] Joshua D. Kertzer, **“Seriousness, Grand Strategy, and Paradigm Shifts in the ‘War on Terror’”**, *International Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 4, 2007, pp. 961–79.

[3] Sami Zeidan, **“Desperately Seeking Definition: The International Community's Quest for Identifying the Specter of Terrorism”**, *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2004, pp. 491–92.

[4] S. Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 2002.

Fundamentalism can be defined as a strict and literal interpretation of religious scriptures, dogmas, or practices and a staunch adherence to irreducible beliefs or 'fundamentals'.[5] In addition, there is great emphasis on distinguishing one's in-group and out-group. According to Michael Bernstein,

> In-groups are the groups to which individuals both belong and psychologically identify, while out-groups are those to which individuals do not belong or identify. Categorizations based on ingroup–outgroup distinctions have a profound impact on social interactions, including aspects of prejudice, reward allocation, stereotyping, and group conflict.[6]

The term fundamentalism was first used in the 1920s by a group of Evangelical Protestants who opposed attempts by some Christian theologists of their time, who sought to explain traditional Christian beliefs in light of modern science and histography. Opposed to Darwin's Theory of Evolution and the high level of liquor consumption in society, the early fundamentalists published a series of 12 pamphlets under the title "The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth" (1915–20), which emphasised that the Bible was the 'inerrant' word of God.

However, the anti-modern and literalist adherence to religious texts and dogma was not limited to Christianity but was present in other religious communities around the same time. For instance, much of the Islamic world struggled to throw off the colonial yoke at that time, and radical movements like Muslim Brotherhood emerged in the 1920s. Since then, many religious communities have witnessed the rise of fundamentalist movements within them.

Many violent extremist and terrorist organisations of our times may show fundamentalist traits, ranging from Salafi-jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, Shia militant forces like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq, Christian terrorist groups like Orange Volunteers in Northern Ireland and Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, Buddhist extremist Groups like Ma Ba Tha and 969 Movement in Myanmar and Sikh terrorist groups like Babbar Khalsa.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that all fundamentalist groups are violent extremists or terrorists. For instance, Christian fundamentalists of Evangelical Protestants were mainly linked to pre-millennial eschatology and were strictly apolitical and non-violent. Similarly, Madkhalism is associated with Quietist thought within the broader Salafi movement in Saudi Arabia. Although highly punctilious in religious practices, its followers who follow the writings of Sheikh Rabaee Al Madkhalee insist on loyalty to both monarchical rule, such as in Saudi Arabia, and secular authoritarian governments in the Arab world. The fundamentalist Deobandi movement in India supported the Indian freedom struggle against the British Raj and

[5] Judith Nagata, "**Beyond Theology: Toward an Anthropology of 'Fundamentalism'**", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 103, No. 2, June 2001, pp. 481–98.

[6] Michael Bernstein, "Ingroups and Outgroups", in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*, John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

India's adoption of a secular Constitution post-independence while opposing the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Thus, fundamentalist adherence to one's religious beliefs cannot always be linked to adopting violent extremist or terrorist actions, even though the tendency towards resorting to religion-inspired violence remains high.

In countries like India, where the number of terrorists is far less than people harbouring passionate religious ardour, government machinery and security forces need to be actively vigilant in monitoring the trajectory of fundamentalist movements in various communities and groups. They should also seek to build effective social, political and ideological firewalls to keep the large pool of fundamentalists from adopting violent extremist and terrorist tendencies.

Radicalism and Radicalisation

Additionally, religious fundamentalism, racial supremacism, as found in the ideologies of Fascism and Nazism; national and sub-national insurgencies, and revolutionary political ideologies such as Anarchism and Communism, serve as ideological drivers for violent extremism and terrorism.

In the domain of counter-terrorism, the terms radicalism and radicalisation are commonly used and often misunderstood. The Oxford Dictionary succinctly defines radicalism as "in favour of extreme and complete political or social change".[7] The etymological origin of the word 'radical' lies in the Latin word 'radix', which means 'the root'. In the domain of politics and international relations, radicals refer to those groups of people who seem to bring about deep-rooted and fundamental changes to the existing socio-political ideology and institutions. Thus, radicals wish to bring about a new socio-political order by uprooting the existing one.[8]

For instance, Islamists call for throwing off Western governance systems in Muslim countries and introducing a highly purist form of Shariah rule as they claim was implemented by the Prophet and subsequently by the Four Pious Caliphs (the Rashidun).

Radicalism did not historically have a negative connotation as many revolutionaries of republican and liberal political philosophies in the 18th and 19th centuries proudly called themselves 'radicals'. In the words of Astrid Bötticher, "Radicalism became a political doctrine inspiring republican and national movements committed to individual and collective freedom and emancipation, directed against the monarchic

[7] The word 'radical', Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (online), March 2023.
[8] C. Calhoun, *The Roots of Radicalism: Tradition, the Public Sphere, and Early 19th Century Social Movements*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2011.

and aristocratic post-1815 status quo. At that time, radicalism was mostly anti-clerical, anti-monarchist, and definitely pro-democracy."[9]

The word 'radicalisation' has been derived from the word radicalism and is said to have first gained currency in the 1930s to refer to the indoctrination and recruitment techniques of left-wing extremists. The usage became more dubiously popular as left-wing extremism spread across the globe by the 1960s. However, in the 2000s, the term was used for jihadist ensnarement of impressionable minds into the terrorist ranks.[10]

In simple terms, radicalisation is the transformative process that a law-abiding citizen of a state or a member of society undergoes to become a person who starts accepting principles and actions of violent extremism and terrorism.[11]

According to a report from the United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism,[12]

> The notion of 'radicalization' is generally used [by some States] to convey the idea of a process through which an individual adopts an increasingly extremist set of beliefs and aspirations. This may include, but is not defined by, the willingness to condone, support, facilitate or use violence to further political, ideological, religious or other goals.

Radicalism vis-à-vis Extremism

As the above definition may suggest, radicalisation is today linked to extremism, which might suggest that radicalism and extremism are synonymous and interchangeable. While in most cases this might be true, it is also a fact that many academicians and experts fail to make any differentiation which is, in reality, quite subtle.

However, it would be necessary first to understand the meaning of the term 'political extremism'. According to several security experts, political extremists refer to people who are quite dogmatic, intolerant, and hostile towards not only all competing political ideologies and philosophies but even towards their proponents. While radical actors might be fundamentally antithetical towards the existing socio-political order, they may or may not view politics as a zero-sum game. Furthermore, they may not be vehemently opposed to the existence of their rivals—be they, people of foreign origin, belonging to a different religion or supporters of a different political ideology, etc.

[9] Astrid Bötticher, **"Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism"**, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2017, pp. 73–77.

[10] F Khosrokhavar, *Radicalisation*, Les Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris, 2014.

[11] **"'Radicalisation' and 'Violent Extremism'"**, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes, July 2018.

[12] **"Reference Guide: Developing National and Regional Action Plans to Prevent Violent Extremism"**, United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism.

Thus, Gandhi was a radical leader in that he opposed the Western imperial rule of his time and practised his version of rural socialism as opposed to capitalist colonialism. Still, he was not an extremist as he never hated or despised the British personally and used non-violence even as his means of resisting colonial excesses. Thus, radicals may not be as harsh in their actions as extremists are.

In the words of R. Koselleck and G. Sartori:

> Extremists, viewing politics as a zero-sum game, tend – circumstance permitting – to engage in aggressive militancy, including criminal acts and mass violence in the fanatical will for gaining and holding political power. Where extremists gain state power, they tend to destroy social diversity and seek to bring comprehensive homogenization of society based on an often faith-based ideology with apocalyptic traits. At the societal level, extremist movements are authoritarian, and if in power, extremist rulers tend to become totalitarian. Extremists glorify violence as a conflict resolution mechanism and are opposed to the constitutional state, majority-based democracy, the rule of law, and human rights for all.[13]

Whereas non-extremist radicals like Gandhi, Martin Luther, and Nelson Mandela can exist, who bring about a more democratic and egalitarian order, extremist radicals tend to favour a more intolerant, militant, and authoritarian dispensation. Experts like Peter Neumann make the distinction between cognitive radicalisation (people who hold extremist beliefs) as against behavioural radicalisation (people who take non-violent and violent action in support of radical socio-political change).

Although the meaning of radicalism and extremism remains vague in the absence of legal definitions, many strategic experts like Astrid Bötticher have sought to build academic consensus over these terminologies to bring clarity to many government-run Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism (CVET) programmes and De-radicalisation across the globe that struggle with different kinds of subjects that require more specialised attention.[14]

Violent Extremism and Terrorism

There are also two other terms—violent extremism and terrorism—that are the subject of confusion and debate among security experts. Thus, violent extremism is a broader term that covers terrorism, along with hate crimes and fomenting communal clashes.

[13] Astrid Bötticher, **"Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism"**, no. 9.

[14] Ibid.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of the United States, violent extremism refers to the "encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals".[15] This is the broadest description of socially and politically disruptive activities, including terrorist attacks.

Similarly, US Agency for International Development (USAID) defines violent extremist activities as the "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives".[16]

Violent extremism also covers hate crimes ranging from hate speeches, direct physical assault, vandalising and desecrating sacred and revered sites, property damage, lynching, verbal and physical abuse, social and/or online stalking, sticking of offensive posters and graffiti, use of weapons. Hate can be directed against members of a particular section of society based on race, ethnicity, language, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, disability, wealth, etc.[17] Violent extremism also covers sectarian and ethnic clashes that may rise to the level of genocide and ethnic cleansing in some instances.

Terrorism is just one of the manifestations of violent extremism. Unfortunately, as is well-known, there is also a lack of international consensus on the definition of terrorism. According to Alec Schmid,[18] terrorism can be viewed as a tactic and a doctrine. As a tactic, terrorism involves indiscriminately using direct violent action against non-combatants and civilians. As a doctrine, terrorism involves the strategic belief that political goals can be achieved by coercing a government or even the international community through terrorist actions.

According to the 2011 revised academic consensus definition,

> Terrorism refers, on the one hand, to a doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties.[19]

[15] **"'Radicalisation' and 'Violent Extremism'"**, no. 11.

[16] **"The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency: Putting Principles into Practice"**, USAID, September 2011.

[17] E.A. Stanko, **"Re-Conceptualising the Policing of Hatred: Confessions and Worrying Dilemmas of a Consultant"**, *Law and Critique*, Vol. 12, 2001, pp. 309–29.

[18] A.P. Schmid (ed.), *Handbook of Terrorism Research*, Routledge, London, 2011, pp. 86–87.

[19] Ibid.

Counter-Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation

Ironically, there has not just been confusion over definitions of terrorism, radicalisation, and violent extremism but even counter-radicalisation programmes launched by security agencies worldwide. The methodologies and terminologies used in counter-radicalisation programmes were developed separately in different countries and were subject to constant revision. This, in turn, caused confusion as the matter was not just an issue of syntactical nuance but had practical implications. As each set of counter-radicalisation initiatives or steps addressed a particular concern, used a unique approach, and had different standards of measurement that are applicable in different stages of the lactic cycle of radicalisation—with characteristic behaviour, tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs)—they could not be lumped under one overarching category.

Thus, there was no agreement over terms like 'anti-radicalisation', 'counter-radicalisation', and 'de-radicalisation', as these three terms were also being used interchangeably. Gradually, unanimity emerged. Now, the term 'anti-radicalisation' is rarely used and is mainly associated with programmes aimed to protect segments of the population that have only recently come under the influence of radicalisation and also covers measures related to detection and developing deterrence.

On the other hand, 'counter-radicalisation programmes' target those radicalised elements that may have not yet joined forces of violent extremism or terrorism and can be rescued before they attempt the dangerous transition. The measures suited to counter-terrorism operations include disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.[20] The third category pertains to 'de-radicalisation programmes', devised for those individuals who may have already aided, abetted, or committed acts of violent extremism. Thus, these measures cover post-surrender and post-detention programmes.

However, all these three programmes still generically fall under 'counter-radicalisation'. Many of these behaviour modification programmes under the categories mentioned above cover ideological or religious counselling, vocational education, recreational and psychological rehabilitation, inter-religious or inter-communal discourse programmes, post-release surveillance, and care, as well as the involvement of family members and civil society to foster rehabilitation.

Thus, we find greater clarity emerging over previously contentious issues related to violent extremism and terrorism. With more academic consensus and unanimity of views at the international levels, it is hoped that various counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation programmes would become more effective in fighting a significant threat to global security and the socio-political order.

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[20] See John Horgan, **"From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalisation into Terrorism"**, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 618, July 2008, pp. 80–94; **"Deradicalisation or Disengagement? Perspectives on Terrorism"**, *International Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2014, pp. 291–98; "Individual Disengagement: A Psychological Perspective", in Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (eds), *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, Routledge, New York and London, 2009, pp. 17–29.

About the Author

Dr. Adil Rasheed is Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
New Delhi 110 010 India
T +91-11-2671 7983 F +91-11-2615 4191
www.idsa.in
Twitter @IDSAIndia
www.facebook.com/ManoharParrikarInstituteforDefenceStudiesAnalyses