Right-wing ethno-nationalists and jihadi Salafists

7 October 2024

Morten Bøås, from the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), examines the similarities between right-wing ethno-nationalists and jihadi Salafists

It may seem strange to argue that people who subscribe to immensely opposing ideologies should have anything in common. However, recent research suggests that this may not be as strange as one initially thought.

The PREVEX project, but also like-minded studies, have shown that religious beliefs and ideological conviction matter less for individuals who initially move into the 'world' of violent extremism. The path of radicalisation is not one paved with strong beliefs about religion or ideology. For most, it is something else that makes them make choices that, unfortunately, so easily and dramatically can transform their life trajectory.

Economic marginalisation and social abandonment Economic troubles, social alienation, and the feeling of abandonment; of neglect, the feeling that nobody cares about you and your life seems to be more important in the initial stage of radicalisation than religious beliefs and ideological convictions. This does not mean that religion and ideology do not matter. They do, and these factors increase in importance the longer an individual is embedded in a violent extremist environment, but this is much more prevalent for those who rise through the ranks in violent extremist organisations and environments into leadership positions.

For those that remain in rank-and-file positions, their turn to violent extremism that may seem like a life-altering choice may be more of a situational pose. It is not an all-consuming identity that absorbs the entire persona, but a pose that is assumed based on circumstances and the social environment in which the person in question is included.

Implications for ways out of extremism

If this is the case, it has enormous implications for how we think about the way out of violent extremism.

This holds for both right-wing ethno- nationalists and jihadi Salafists. We need more systematic evidence about what factors trigger this situational posture to violent extremism. This is important because if what is a situational pose is not understood as that but seen as an identity, the person in question simply has become; it has literally become he or she. This has huge implications for how we treat that being. Obviously, if the situational pose includes violence or other acts that break the law, sanctions in line with the law are in place.

However, how these people are treated after that is more important. Are they treated as deplorable people whose not only views and actions should be detested, but their very being is seen as immoral beyond redemption? Alternatively, do we seek to understand what kind of circumstances were present in their life that precipitated the turn to violent extremism as a situational pose? Was it born out of anger, fear and despair over social conditions, real or perceived, or something else beyond a violent ideology that triggered this? Based on what we know about people that have been part of both extremes – that is right-wing ethno-nationalism and jihadi Salafism – social anger and despair that are grounded in real, often material grievances often seem to be an underlying, but still primary cause.

If these situational poses most commonly relate not to exposure to, for instance, online radicalisation through jihadi Salafi propaganda, or in the case of right-wing ethno-nationalism, fake news, for example, in the form of false rumours about migrants or refugees as criminals or unjustly receiving benefits others are excluded from, where should our focus be placed? Should we focus on the triggering effect or the underlying grievances that make them vulnerable to act violently based on a triggering effect?

How to deal with triggering effects and underlying causes

The argument is not that we should avoid dealing with triggering effects. Obviously, they must be dealt with, be it through credible campaigns against, for example, online radicalisation campaigns or punitive actions by the police and courts if the case be that protests get out of hand or are illegal as they are based, for example, on hate- speech and racism.

The problem, however, is that this is what states worldwide tend to do. They focus on the manifest acts of violent extremism, often with little to no interest in understanding underlying causes. There are reasons for this. Underlying causes such as social alienation, joblessness and underemployment, urban decay, and rural poverty are harder to deal with.

However, as policies to address these underlying issues also raise questions concerning equity and what constitutes an inclusive society, one can at least suspect that this is not always on the tallest order of some governments' agenda. These individuals we are discussing here tend to vote less often than other population groups, and therefore, they do not have many who can credibility voice their concerns. The consequence is, unfortunately, that their sense of alienation and marginalisation from the state they are supposed to and want to belong to only increases.

What this suggests is that if states and governments really want to seriously prevent people from falling into the slippery path towards violent extremism, first as a situational pose, as an act of resistance against something, and that this, for some, later becomes a life-altering event, there are social issues that must be taken seriously. Nothing facilitates violent extremist views more effectively than social polarisation and socio-economic marginalisation, particularly if this is seen as happening to the benefit of others.

The best strategy for preventing violent extremism from taking root is, therefore, to focus on social policies in areas and among population groups where sentiments of abandonment are already known to be prevalent. These efforts, however, need to be targeted and transparent and come with both rights and obligations. As boring and mundane as it may seem, schools that work, public libraries that are open and inclusive, and public health services that are affordable and reachable are more effective in countering violent extremism than money spent on special programmes aiming at deradicalisation. Many of those involved are not much engulfed in ideology or religion that justifies violence. They are angry, and the situational pose to violent extremism is just a way to vent anger because other options are not seen as available.

Will such a societal approach work like a wand of magic against all expressions of violent extremism? This is certainly not the case. There will always be violent entrepreneurs who will try to utilise perceptions of social injustice to the benefit of their ideological convictions or religious beliefs. Nonetheless, a transparent state that tries effectively to tackle underlying social issues and economic conditions would reduce triggering effects that cause situational poses to violent extremism and thereby also lower the appeal of the violent entrepreneurs that try to take advantage of this.

Please Note: This is a Commercial Profile

Contributor Details

Stakeholder Details

- Article Categories
- Social Sciences

- Article Tags
- Government
- Politics
- Religion

- Publication Tags
- OAG 044 - October 2024

- Stakeholder Tags
- SH - The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)

Journal Details

This article first appeared in Open Access Government October 2024.

To view the article click here.

CITE This Article

Morten Bøås (2024), *"Right-wing ethno-nationalists and jihadi Salafists"*, Open Access Government October 2024, pp.320-321. Available at

https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/article/right-wing-ethno-nationalists-and-jihadi-salafists/183483/.(Accessed: 07 Oct 2024)

Primary Contributor

Morten Bøås
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)

Creative Commons License

Reader Comments