Countering the Narratives of Extremism

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Madam chair, my fellow panellists, the event organisers and you the audience, many thanks indeed for the kind invitation and the opportunity to be with you here today to talk about a pressing issue facing various governments and communities across the world.

In this talk, I wish to present my thoughts concerning how the dominant discourse on the role of religion in society, in particular on Muslim communities in the West, has a profound effect on community-state relations on a number of different levels. I would also like to talk about how it is possible to counter violent extremism through a multi-layered, multifaceted approach that reduces stigmatisation and resistance, something, according to critical voices, that the present approach to CVE has unwittingly produced, especially in Britain and in other parts of Western Europe.

First, it creates the impression that Muslim communities are homogenous, powerless and entirely unable to organise themselves in response to the challenges of violence extremism. It takes away agency, and narrows the lens through which state-community relations are formulated. When governments in Western Europe and North America only wish to talk to their Muslim communities about terrorism and radicalisation, it disengages groups who encounter their own internal challenges of ethnic, sectarian and cultural division. It also raises suspicion that governments are only interested in a certain type of liberal Islam that is wholly pro-integration.

Second, while there are indeed narratives of exclusion and victimisation that exist within the wider context of Muslim communities who are in the process of integrating into majority society, one cannot ignore a great deal of evidence to support their claims, which is often disregarded. There is a particular discourse on 'the left behind' concerning the aspirations and social mobilisations of what could be described as former working class communities throughout the West. This is well documented in research on social inequalities and the problems of social immobility. Therefore, it is no surprise that many Muslim migrants who came to the West, particularly to Western Europe as part of a post-war migration process, now into third and even fourth generations, also experience genuine instances of economic and cultural alienation. State actors continually draw attention to cultural issues within communities, such as the treatment of women, female genital mutilation, grooming of vulnerable young women or a perennial focus on radicalisation as a conveyor belt to terrorism. This potentially further alienates a significant body of people looking to the state for answers to the problems they collectively face as communities and neighbourhoods across Western Europe.

Third, there is a presumption that the religious narrative encourages vulnerable young people to turn to violent Islamist radicalisation to seemingly generate solutions to their worldly

problems. However, analysis of social media from Islamic State suggests that less than 10% of its output refers to religion alone. Rather, the likes of Islamic State focus on grievances, which are rooted within the Muslim experience in Western European and North American societies. They play on the injustices of racism, exclusion, vilification in the media, political marginalisation and cultural isolation. It is not simply enough to provide counter narratives, but to work towards models of social equality that encourage social cohesion, building trust and confidence both in the institutions of the state and in the workings of society in general.

Fourth, it is almost impossible for researchers, policymakers and activists to encourage governments to shift the huge juggernaut that is the dominant trend of neoliberal economics across the Western world. Nor is it possible to prop up states that are close to collapse (or have 'gone rogue'), therefore leading to insecurity and injustices meted out by various arms of the state. However, there is room to work with grassroots organisations. Such groups are committed to challenging violent extremism within their communities, building social and political trust. Moreover, these community groups often face the brunt of criticism from within their own communities for seemingly 'selling out'. They also face the challenges of capacity and the limitations of resources often facing small organisations competing for funds in a marketplace that is crowded and often squeezed due to limitations in the availability of funding more generally.

Fifth, one way to counter the narratives of the Islamic State is by empowering Muslim communities in the West through Islam. Now this is not a ridiculous suggestion. During the 1980s, the German government invested a great deal of thinking into developing a system of Islamic education for the growing number of German-born Turks who were facing the brunt of racism and discrimination at one level. At the other level, these Turks encountered intergenerational disconnect from parents whose cultural values were perhaps more attuned to lives in the sending regions before migration. This was a well thought out programme that aimed to introduce Islamic education funded by the state. It was eventually shelved due to various political pressures, but not before the government of Helmut Kohl spent three years investigating the issue, generating research and producing policy guidelines.

Hence, the lesson is that governments need to be somewhat sensitive about instrumentalising a strategy that wishes to counter violent extremism with every good intention, but without the resources needed to stabilise communities, building trust and engagement in the process. Countering violent extremism is simply not a matter of countering the narratives of Islamic State, because they do not use the language of religion or ideology. They play on the grievances faced by Muslims in the West, which are real and observable. The recent data on Islamic state recruits recovered by the German intelligence services provided information on over 20,000 foreign fighters who joined the Islamic State. The overall profile suggests that these predominantly young men had low education, an offending history, a record of violence, experienced racism, exclusion and marginalisation, but crucially had little or no knowledge of Islam.

In trying to understand the drivers and the solutions to violent extremism among Muslim communities, but also white working class communities experiencing rapid downward social mobility who enter into the theatre of far right extremism, it is important not to focus merely on the structural, neither to concentrate energies on the cultural. Instead, there is a need to explore the symbiotic effects of culture and structure and how the psychological dimensions help to generate a systematic understanding of the interactions between the individual, the community and the state. At present, due to various political developments concerning formulation of counter violent extremism strategy, there is a great deal of difference of opinion between state actors and the community at large, especially in Western Europe. These

differences lead to politicisation and polarisation, not prevention nor protection. The fact that policymakers have been struggling to profile the potential violent extremist suggests that perhaps the direction of questions are wrong. If governments attempt to promote the conveyor belt notion that vulnerable young people are at risk of radicalisation and later committing acts of violent extremism, there is a risk in stigmatising an entire faith group as well as disregarding genuine instances of political resistance and turning it into pre-violent extremism thought that can be policed or indeed securitised.

The discussion on what causes violent extremism has led to the strategy of CVE, which is a branded concept that spreads from California to Canberra, but there is a significant gap between perceptions and experiences in communities in general and the positions taken by the state with regards to the policy framework. It is clear that there are still ongoing issues, in particular in the case of violent extremist acts carried out in France, Belgium and Germany during the last two years. This suggests that there is still a problem, but the nature of this problem remains unclear. For too long, some policymakers have concentrated on religion and ideology. Here, the aim is to fix what is regarded as problematic religiosity by replacing it with a moderate or more liberal Islam, using certain proxy actors with connections to the communities at large, but who have apparently seen the errors of their ways and are now liberated from the shackles that once changed them to regressive Islamism. However, while states do this they ignore the real grievances. That is, the structural dynamics of racism, inequality, social division and the collapse of the sense of multiculturalism and diversity as an asset for citizenship. Instead, there is a tendency to securitise diversity, with a focus on deradicalisation as part of a conveyor belt theory suggesting that individuals move from low-level to more extremist forms of radicalisation and ultimately to violent extremism. Radicalisers mobilise young people attracted to a unifying, ostensibly empowering and holistically conceptualised notion that seemingly addressing grievances that are without doubt real and have tremendous history to them. The more that states ignore genuine structural grievances, the more that organisations such as the Islamic State can and do play on them.

Therefore, the solutions need to be structural and cultural, where in fact Islam can also be seen as the cure of radical Islamism and therefore part of the solution. However, without the structural component, i.e. investment in communities and neighbourhoods, and even different regions of society, the battle is unwinnable. Worse, it might do more harm than good. Extremism is a symptom, not a cause of instability, insecurity and patterns of anomie facing various groups. Religion is merely a convenient umbrella, an instrument of mobilisation, not necessarily the first point of departure concerning identifying the causes of radicalisation and violent extremism. A counter extremist strategy that debunks the narrative of Islamic State but does not deal with the structural issues is likely to fail. A policy attempt that focuses entirely on religion as a problem is likely to miss the mark, as is a policy that focuses on religion as a solution alone.

I hope some of these thoughts and observations have provided food for thought. I look forward to your comments, thoughts and observations.

Thank you!