
Why beliefs always matter, but rarely help us predict jihadist violence. The role of cognitive extremism as a precursor for violent extremism.

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Abstract

Much of the rhetoric spread by jihadist organisations seems to indicate a strong commitment towards a set of religious and political ideas. But does cognitive extremism really lead to violent extremism? Terrorism scholars have been divided by this question for over a decade now. This article summarises and reflects upon the key theoretical debates about the question whether cognitive extremism really is a precursor for violent extremism. Using Schmid's distinction between non-violent and not-violent political movements, it argues that even though there is no linear path from adopting extremist ideas towards committing acts of violence, cognitive extremism of some extent seems to be a necessary precondition for violent extremism and that beliefs always play a, though not necessarily the central role. This however does not mean that cognitive extremism is a great predictor for eventual violent extremism or that violent extremists are necessarily the most ideologically radicalised.

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1. IS COGNITIVE EXTREMISM A PRECURSOR FOR VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

Much of the rhetoric spread by jihadist organisations seems to indicate a strong commitment towards a set of religious and political ideas. But is it really the adherence to such extremist beliefs that motivates people to engage in violent activities right up to terrorist attacks? While it will probably sound almost tautological to most people that terrorists engaged in violence

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on behalf of an extremist ideology must hold extremist beliefs, this assumption has been the topic of quite some debate within terrorism studies for more than a decade.²

This essay therefore seeks to summarise key debates about the question whether cognitive extremism is really a precursor for violent extremism. While it relies on examples from Islamist and jihadist contexts, its conclusions seem to be applicable to other types of extremism as well. In the next section, key terms will be defined. It will be explained how radicalism differs from extremism. The subsequent section deals with the connection between cognitive and violent extremism. It will be argued that radicalisation processes into violent extremism usually do not follow a linear path and that not all cognitive extremists become violent extremists but that almost all violent extremists could, to varying degrees, be described as cognitive extremists before they turn towards political violence. But since the overwhelming majority of cognitive extremists do not become violent extremists, cognitive extremism does not provide us with great information on the likelihood of an individual becoming a violent extremist. Section five recaps the argument of this essay, lays out some suggestions for future research and offers some very brief implications for future policies concerning extremism in liberal societies.

2. KEY TERMS

2.1. RADICALISATION, RADICALISM AND EXTREMISM

Terrorism researchers have debated the meaning of the terms radicalisation and extremism for years. Both share the notion of being removed from the norms and values of mainstream society. But since the norms and values of any given society are the topic of

² For example: Zeyno Baran, 'Fighting the War of Ideas'. *Foreign Affairs*, 84:6 (2005), pp. 68-78; John Horgan, 'From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism'. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618:1 (2008b), pp. 80-94; Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert, 'Why conventional wisdom on radicalization fails: the persistence of a failed discourse'. *International Affairs* 86:4 (2010), pp. 889-901; Lorenzo Vidino. 'The role of non-violent Islamists in Europe'. *CTC Sentinel* (2010), pp. 11-12; Randy Borum. 'Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories' *Journal of Strategic Security* 4:4 (2011a), pp. 1-36; Randy Borum. 'Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A review of conceptual models and empirical research'. *Journal of Strategic Security* 4:4 (2011b), pp. 37-62; Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller. 'The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization'. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24:1 (2012), pp. 1-21; Peter Neumann. 'The trouble with radicalization'. *International Affairs* 89:4 (2013), pp. 873-893.

fierce dispute themselves and prone to change over time, the terms radicalisation and extremism are therefore subjective, relative and context dependent.³

It is however clear that radicalisation generally designates a process, sometimes referred to as ‘what goes on before the bomb goes off’.⁴ Extremism, on the other hand, is assumed to be the result of that process.

‘Radicalization is to extremism as velocity is to position. That is, radicalization is a (positive) change in the degree of extremism expressed by an individual or group.’⁵

Another obvious product of radicalisation could be radicalism. Indeed, it is not instantly obvious what differentiates these two terms from each other. One useful distinction has been provided by Schmid.⁶ Schmid contends that radicalism as a historical concept does not necessarily include the support of violence. Contrary to radicalism, extremism is hostile to pluralism and tends to be more authoritarian, anti-democratic and uncompromising. Because of these characteristics extremists isolate themselves from conversations with non-extremists and at least passively support the use of violence as a means to reach political aims.⁷ The next section will deal with the implications of the question of violence for the understanding of cognitive and violent extremism.

³ David R. Mandel, ‘Radicalisation: What Does It Mean?’ in Thomas M. Pick, Anne Speckhard and Beatrice Jacuch (eds) *Home-Grown Terrorism* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2010), pp. 101-113.

⁴ Mark Sedgwick. ‘The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion’. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22:4 (2010), pp. 479.

⁵ Mandel, op. cit., pp. 110-111.

⁶ Alex P. Schmid, ‘Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review?’ International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT 2013).

<https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf>

⁷ Schmid, ‘Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review?’, op. cit.; Alex P. Schmid, ‘Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?’.

International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT 2014). <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014.pdf>

2.2. NON-VIOLENT, NOT-VIOLENT OR VIOLENT?

An important distinction is made by most terrorism scholars between cognitive and violent extremism. For the purpose of this paper, cognitive extremism is defined as holding political beliefs

*'...at variance with that supported by existing state authorities, and for which individual liberties are to be curtailed in the name of collective goals, including the mass murder of those who would actually or potentially disagree with that program.'*⁸

Consequently, I define violent extremism as the use of violence to further those beliefs.

According to Schmid, who uses Midlarsky's definition as well, extremism cannot be non-violent, but only not-violent.⁹ This implies that while extremist groups may not be using violence at a specific point, a changing political context could lead to the adoption of violent methods. Schmid only applies the attribute non-violent to individuals, groups and movements which are principally committed to only using peaceful means. This means that while merely cognitive extremists are not-violent they are not non-violent. Radicals on the other hand can be non-violent or not-violent, depending on whether or not they are opposed to the use of violence under any circumstances.¹⁰

Obviously there are other definitions of extremism. The PREVENT strategy for example defines extremism as opposition to 'fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs', but not as inherently violent.¹¹ After the Conservatives won the UK general elections in 2010, the PREVENT strategy underwent a revision. The revised version clearly assumes cognitive extremism to be a precursor of, not a firewall against, violent

⁸ Midlarsky, Manus. *Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Cambridge: University Press 2011), p. 7.

⁹ Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review?', op. cit.

¹⁰ Schmid, 'Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?', op. cit.

¹¹ Prevent Strategy, 'Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty'. 2011, p. 108.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf

extremism. Additionally, challenging the ideas assumed to be motivating political violence became a more central aspect of the revised strategy.¹²

In his 2011 speech at the Munich security conference, David Cameron spoke of ‘people who may reject violence’, but who are nevertheless part of the minority that supports Islamist extremism.¹³ It appears as if the government intends to tackle radical non-violent beliefs (which it refers to as extremist) which are not in harmony with liberal and human rights. By aiming at challenging such extremist or more specifically Islamist beliefs the government’s concern goes beyond the connection between non-violent beliefs and violent behaviour. By ignoring the distinction between non-violent and not-violent ideas it widens the scope of beliefs which it aims to tackle, which may render its efforts less accurate, effective and justified. This is especially true under the plausible assumption that non-violent beliefs have an even lower base-rate than not-violent extremist beliefs.

But using the terms cognitive and violent extremism in the way suggested here narrows the question of this essay down in a very interesting manner: is the adoption of beliefs that at least principally condone violence a precursor for engaging in actual violence? It focuses on what I believe to be of primary interest: what is the connection between beliefs and behavior, between conviction and action? That is not to say that the connection between radical beliefs and violence would not be worthwhile investigating, but it would lead us away from the key concern about the correspondence between beliefs and behavior because many radicals beliefs and ideologies are not even theoretically in favor of violence.

3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COGNITIVE AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

3.1. ARE COGNITIVE EXTREMISTS ON A LINEAR PATH TOWARDS VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

The relationship between cognitive and violent extremism has been the subject of fierce debate. Some models, among them the ‘conveyor belt theory’ and the NYPD model

¹² CONTEST, ‘Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty’. 2011, p. 58-77.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97995/strategy-contest.pdf

¹³ David Cameron, ‘PM’s speech at Munich Security Conference’. 2011.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference>

have suggested a linear progression through different stages of ideological commitment that culminates in violent extremism.¹⁴ From this perspective cognitive extremism and the involvement with Islamist groups that do not use violence are the first steps that push young people towards terrorism. Baran has suggested that *Hizbut Tahrir* (Party of Liberation) ‘indoctrinates individuals with radical ideology, priming them for recruitment by more extreme organisations where they can take part in actual operations’, though it should be noted that Baran does not claim this to be the automatic outcome.¹⁵

Journalist Mehdi Hassan criticised the ‘conveyor belt theory’ in a 2012 dialogue with Maajid Nawaz, the founder of the counter-extremism think-tank Quilliam, as the belief that ‘young Muslims start off alienated and angry, slowly become more religious and politicised, and then almost automatically turn to violence and terror’.¹⁶ But quite obviously cognitive extremism is not enough. Cognitive extremists do not automatically gravitate towards violence. Members of extremist groups such as *Hizbut-Tahrir* and *al-Muhajiroun* (The Emigrants) did hold extremist beliefs, but many did not go on to commit acts of terrorism. According to Sageman ‘talk of violence does not necessarily lead to action. Very few people talking about violence go on to use it’.¹⁷ While many supporters of linear models of radicalisation into violent extremism would probably agree that the turn to political violence does not happen automatically, they view the adoption of extremist beliefs and the participation in not-violent movements as a dangerous pre-stage that may lead cognitive extremists to eventually join terrorist groups.¹⁸

In support of this, one could point to the high percentage of foreign fighters and people convicted for terrorism-related offences who formerly belonged to groups once at least

¹⁴ Baran, op.cit.; Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt, ‘Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat. NYPD Intelligence Division’. 2007. http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/files/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf

¹⁵ Baran, Op. cit., pp. 68.

¹⁶ Mehdi Hassan, ‘Age of extremes: Mehdi Hasan and Maajid Nawaz debate’. *New Statesman*, July 4, 2012. Citing Hassan's interpretation of the “conveyor belt theory” from the dialogue with Nawaz is not to suggest that Quilliam subscribes to it. Nawaz makes it clear in his response that he does not think there is sufficient evidence for or against the “conveyor belt theory”, but that he views extremist ideology as harmful even when it does not lead to violence: ‘Whether or not there is a “conveyor belt”, we must surely agree that the spread of extremism in societies is unhealthy for integration in its own right.’

¹⁷ Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2016), p. 90.

¹⁸ Silber and Bhatt, op. cit.

superficially perceived to be non-violent such as *al-Muhajiroun*, *Millatu Ibrahim* (The Way of Abraham), *Kaldet til Islam* (The Call to Islam) or *Sharia4 Belgium*. German federal police and intelligence services for example stated that 96% of all jihadists that traveled to Syria were associated with an extremist Islamist group.¹⁹ Klausen notes that 80% of jihadists belonged to a few well-known Islamist circles.²⁰ So even though not every member or supporter of these groups ended up engaging in violence, making the jump from one of these groups towards violence is one possible and rather frequent route. Vidino therefore argued that not-violent Islamist groups serve as the gateway towards more extreme groups in a similar way that ‘gateway drugs’ can lead some consumers towards ‘hard drugs’.²¹

The second major criticism of models such as the conveyor belt or the NYPD model is their linearity. Many terrorism researchers and Social Movement Theory scholars have suggested that the assumption of linearity simplifies the actual realities and ignores the non-ideological factors that prominently feature in radicalisation processes.²² As one study asserted, ‘the run-up to a terrorist attack is found to be multipronged and chaotic rather than a neat linear progression through distinct preparatory stages’.²³

It is also not a given that just because members of violent groups engage in similar behavior that they therefore all hold similar beliefs. Social Movement theorists such as Snow have also argued that “that there is probably greater ideological diversity within movements than is often presumed”, a point that could apply to non-violent, not-violent and violent

¹⁹ Bundeskriminalamt, Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Hessisches Informations- und Kompetenzzentrum gegen Extremismus, ‘Analyse der Radikalisierungshintergründe und -verläufe der Personen, die aus islamistischer Motivation aus Deutschland in Richtung Syrien oder Irak ausgereist sind’. 2016.

<https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/arbeitsfelder/af-islamismus-und-islamistischer-terrorismus/zahlen-und-fakten-islamismus/zuf-is-analyse-der-radikalisierungshintergruende>

²⁰ Jytte Klausen, ‘Al-Qaeda–affiliated and Homegrown Jihadism in the UK: 1999- 2010’. *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*. 2010.

²¹ Lorenzo Vidino, ‘Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:2 (2015), pp. 9.

²² Neumann, ‘The trouble with radicalization’, op. cit.; Daniela Pisoiu, ‘Coming to Believe “Truths” About Islamist Radicalization in Europe’. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25:2 (2013), pp. 246-263; Vidino, ‘Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy’, op. cit.

²³ Bart Schuurman and Quirine Eijkman, ‘Indicators of terrorist intent and capability: Tools for threat assessment’, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 8:3 (2015), p. 215.

groups.²⁴ Apart from the question of internal ideological diversity within extremist groups, Snow also points towards empirical research done by Berger²⁵ and Rochford²⁶ about counter-cultural (though non-violent and non-extremist) communities, who both encountered frequent inconsistencies between professed ideological beliefs and actual behavior. While the obvious fact that individuals often fail to live up to stated beliefs does not prove the irrelevance of ideology, it does suggest that the relationship between beliefs and behaviors is not as straightforward, linear and mechanistic as one might expect. This is very much in line with Framing Theory, which views social movements not “merely as carriers of extant ideas and meanings that grow automatically out of structural arrangements, unanticipated events, or existing ideologies”, but instead admits that individuals and groups play an active role in shaping the interpretation of ideologies into collective action frames.²⁷

Additionally, there are even some cases in which the extremity of beliefs decreases again.²⁸ The former Danish jihadist Morten Storm is a good example for the extremity of beliefs decreasing again. Storm had been in close contact with notorious figures such as Omar Bakri Muhammad and Anwar al-Awlaki, but eventually de-radicalised and provided western intelligence services with valuable information about the al-Qaeda network.²⁹

The debate about the connection in between cognitive and violent extremism is obviously closely connected to the debates about PREVENT. Clearly PREVENT is not just worried about ‘action pathways’, but assumes a connection in between violent ideologies and terrorism, between beliefs and behavior. Still, before PREVENT’s major revision in 2011, the

²⁴ Berger, B. M. 1981. *The Survival of a counterculture : ideological work and everyday life among rural communards* (Berkeley: University of California Press)

²⁵ Berger, B. M. 1981. *The Survival of a counterculture : ideological work and everyday life among rural communards* (Berkeley: University of California Press)

²⁶ Rochford, E. B. 1985. *Hare Krishna in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press)

²⁷ Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. 2000. *Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment*. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, p. 613.

²⁸ John Horgan, ‘Deradicalization or Disengagement? A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2:4 (2008a), pp. 291-298; Sageman, ‘Misunderstanding Terrorism’, op.cit.

²⁹ Morten Storm, Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, *Agent Storm: A Spy Inside al-Qaeda* (London: Penguin).

government did not just fund counter-extremist organisations, but also directly supported disengagement efforts by Salafist groups such as the STREET program in Brixton.³⁰

Two of the main proponents of the STREET program were former undercover police officer Robert Lambert and Jonathan Githens-Mazer, who lauded the program for its success in keeping young people from being drawn into terrorism. From their perspective, the government should be less worried about the question ‘do we like their ideas?’ and more concerned with the question ‘are they doers or sayers?’³¹

The two stated that the Salafists did such a good job in their counter-radicalisation efforts because they combined street credibility with strong theological arguments. Additionally, they were well-known and respected in their local communities. And contrary to the government’s promotion of abstract and ill-defined ‘British values’ they appealed to young people’s attachment to their neighbourhood in South London.³²

From Githens-Mazer’s and Lambert’s view the main threat emerges from young people searching for glory and excitement and not from those who are interested in a serious intellectual and theological debate of the religious sources of Islam. Though the Brixton Salafists held views that depart from mainstream positions, they were still sincerely opposed to terrorism and therefore functioned as a ‘firewall’ against and not a precursor to violent extremism.³³

But not everyone was as optimistic about funding Salafist groups. Maher and Frampton have called for the application of value-based criteria when choosing the groups that the government engages with.³⁴ Others questioned whether the short-term security

³⁰ Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert, ‘Quilliam on Prevent: the wrong diagnosis’, The Guardian, October 19, 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/oct/19/prevent-quilliam-foundation-extremism>; Duncan Gardham, ‘Counter-terrorism projects worth £1.2m face axe as part of end to multiculturalism’, The Telegraph, February 11, 2011.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/8319780/Counter-terrorism-projects-worth-1.2m-face-axe-as-part-of-end-to-multiculturalism.html>

³¹ Githens-Mazer and Lambert, ‘Why conventional wisdom on radicalization fails: the persistence of a failed discourse’, op. cit., p. 896.

³² Ibid., p. 896-898.

³³ Ibid., p. 896-898.

³⁴ Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, ‘Choosing Our Friends Wisely: Criteria for Engagement with Muslim Groups’, Policy Exchange (2008). <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/choosing-our-friends-wisely-mar-09.pdf>

benefits of projects such as STREET really exceed both the long-term consequences for social cohesion as well as the long-term security risks of increased levels of religious extremism.³⁵ There is some evidence for both sides of the debate, which certainly does not make it easier to create fair and effective policies. As Vidino put it:

*'Yet, in reality, there is little evidence to conclusively back either the conveyor belt or the firewall argument. There is substantial anecdotal evidence supporting both positions simultaneously, but no systematic, comprehensive studies that can definitively prove either.'*³⁶

3.2. ARE THERE TERRORISTS WHO DO NOT HOLD EXTREMIST VIEWS?

3.2.1. ACTION PATHWAYS WITHOUT COGNITIVE RADICALISATION?

We have seen in the previous section that most cognitive extremists do not become violent extremists. But even if cognitive extremism is not a sufficient condition for violent extremism, is it not at least a necessary condition? Intuitively, it seems obvious that individuals who commit violent acts in the name of a specific political cause or ideology must also hold extreme beliefs.³⁷

Nevertheless, there has been an increasing number of terrorism scholars who have shed some doubt on the notion that individuals who engage in violent extremism are always cognitive extremists as well. Scholars as such as Abrahms, Vidino, Bjørgo, Borum, Horgan, as well as Schuurman and Eijkmann agree that extremist views are not a sufficient and also not a necessary precursor for engagement in terrorist violence.³⁸

As Horgan has pointed out, the fact that an individual commits an act of extremist political violence does not prove that some end-point of cognitive radicalisation has been reached. He rightfully asserts that 'involvement [in violent extremism] is not a sign of a state

³⁵ Vidino, 'The role of non-violent Islamists in Europe', op. cit., p. 9-11.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 11.

³⁷ Neumann, 'The Trouble with radicalization', op. cit.

³⁸ Max Abrahms, 'What terrorists really want'. *International Security* 33:4 (2008), pp. 78-105; Vidino, 'The role of non-violent Islamists in Europe', op. cit.; Tore Bjørgo, 'Dreams and disillusionment: engagement in and disengagement from militant extremist groups' *Crime, Law and Social Change* 55:4 (2011), pp. 277-285; Borum, 'Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories', op. cit.; John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis 2014); Shuurman and Eijkmann, op.cit.

being reached but of an act being done'.³⁹ In fact, some terrorists hardly seem to have undergone a process of radicalisation at all. Githens-Mazer and Lambert for example point out that Rahman Adam (who had changed his name to Anthony Garcia to increase his potential for a modelling career) was a fairly westernised young man who was much less interested or attracted to extremist ideas than his studious, intellectual brother Lamine Adam, but still ended up being the one convicted for terrorism offences after being arrested in 'Operation Crevice' in 2004.⁴⁰ Such cases have led Borum to suggest that we should redirect our focus away from the study of ideology and radicalisation and turn towards 'action pathways' which actually lead towards violent extremist behavior and not just extremist conviction.⁴¹

Authors such as Sageman, Abrahms and Bartlett and Miller have emphasised the key role that non-ideological factors often play in the process of joining and participating in violent extremist groups.⁴² Factors such as social bonds, need of belonging, identity, moral outrage, excitement and status have frequently been found to be greater predictors of violent extremism than holding specific ideas.⁴³

3.2.2. DO BELIEFS EVER NOT MATTER AT ALL?

As we have seen in the previous section, clearly not all terrorists or violent extremists are highly sophisticated ideologues. However, this does not mean that these individuals are not motivated by their less elaborate, possibly simplified understanding of a given ideology. Individuals who are less educated about an ideology but nevertheless strongly convinced of it may actually be more vulnerable to take violent action or to be recruited by a charismatic

³⁹ Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, op. cit., p. 84.

⁴⁰ Githens-Mazer, 'Why conventional wisdom on radicalization fails: the persistence of a failed discourse', op. cit.

⁴¹ Borum, 'Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories', op. cit., p. 8-9.

⁴² Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2004); Abrahms, op. cit.; Bartlett and Miller, op.cit. 2012.

⁴³ Joseph Felter and Jarret Brachman, 'CTC REPORT An Assessment of 516 Combatant Status Review Tribunal (CSRT) Unclassified Summaries'. 2007.

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5f/An_Assessment_of_516_Combatant_Status_Review_Tribunal_\(CSRT\)_Unclassified_Summaries.pdf](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5f/An_Assessment_of_516_Combatant_Status_Review_Tribunal_(CSRT)_Unclassified_Summaries.pdf); James Khalil, Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous: How to Place the Key Disjuncture Between Attitudes and Behaviors at the Heart of Our Research into Political Violence, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37:2 (2014), pp. 198-211.

leader.⁴⁴ Mohammed Bouyeri, the murderer of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, seems to have been strongly influenced by a text written by Amir Sulayman, in which the author claims that especially Muslims without deep faith should become martyrs so they do not risk living a sinful life that would keep them from entering eternal life in paradise.⁴⁵ The more studious intellectual types on the other hand may be more aware of the caveats and limits of specific belief sets.⁴⁶ One study has found that a frequent criticism Islamist Extremists level at jihadists is their superficial knowledge and their action driven-approach to religious ideology.⁴⁷ ISIS has even started to specifically direct their communication efforts towards individuals who have not been fully radicalised yet. Heinke and Raudszus refer to an interview with German foreign fighter Dennis Cuspert who asserts that “because jihad is an obligation, it is unnecessary to know the Arabic language or a lot about the religion in order to join the fight”.⁴⁸ Since radicalisation processes have sped up over the last years, these half-radicalised violent extremists may actually become a more frequent occurrence.⁴⁹

Even though plenty of scholars seem to think that in some cases beliefs and ideas do not matter at all, it is a rather difficult task to find violent extremists in whose cases ideology did not play a role at all. Interestingly, the authors claiming that cognitive extremism is not a necessary precursor to violent extremism usually offer slight caveats, which hint at a (possibly weak) connection between the two. Usually they claim that there are cases in which ideas were not the ‘primary incentive’⁵⁰ or extremists were not ‘fully radicalised’⁵¹ or ‘deeply

⁴⁴ Neumann, op. cit., p. 879

⁴⁵ Ruud Peters, ‘Dutch Islamist Extremism: The Dutch Murderer and his Ideas’ in Rik Coolsaet (ed) *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge in Europe*, pp. 115-127; Simon Cottee, ‘We need to talk about Mohammad. Criminology, Theistic Violence and the Murder of Theo Van Gogh’ *British Journal of Criminology* 54 (2014), pp. 981-1001.

⁴⁶ Githens-Mazer, ‘Why conventional wisdom on radicalization fails: the persistence of a failed discourse’, op. cit.

⁴⁷ Bartlett and Miller, op.cit. 2012.

⁴⁸ Daniel Heinke and Jan Raudszus, ‘ICSR Insight: German Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria’. 2015. <http://icsr.info/2015/01/icsr-insight-german-foreign-fighters-syria-iraq/>

⁴⁹ Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, ‘Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalization and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8:4 (2014), pp. 100-110; Bundeskriminalamt, Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Hessisches Informations- und Kompetenzzentrum gegen Extremismus, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Bart Schuurman and John Horgan, ‘Rationales for terrorist violence in homegrown jihadist groups: A case study from the Netherlands’, *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 27: March/ April (2016), p. 57.

⁵¹ Vidino, ‘Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy’, op. cit., p. 9.

ideological'.⁵² Obviously such cases exist, but that does not indicate that in these cases ideas were not an incentive at all or that extremists were not radicalised or ideological in any way.

Therefore, the question should really not be whether beliefs matter but how they matter. Clearly, group dynamics, social bonds and pre-existing friendships are a very important factor to explain why people become radicalised.⁵³ Often adherence to political or religious ideas does not precede joining a group and engaging in violent activities but is a consequence of it.⁵⁴ The need for belonging and a search for identity, often following a personal crisis, also tend to be key elements during radicalisation processes.⁵⁵ Grievances towards state institutions with regard to police measures perceived to be repressive or specific foreign policy grievances may also be a factor.⁵⁶ Instead of excluding extremist ideology from the analysis, it appears more promising to investigate how each of these elements fits as a part of the 'radicalisation puzzle'.⁵⁷

One helpful perspective on the interaction between these factors stems from Social Movement Theory, which instead of thinking about ideology as "a relatively stable and coherent set of values, beliefs, and goals"⁵⁸ uses the term "collective action frames." This concept allows us to think about the interaction between events, social dynamics and situational interpretations of ideologies that serve as the basis of action in more precise terms without neglecting the role that specific ideas play for violent extremists.⁵⁹

Again, it is difficult to find violent extremists which did not hold extremist views at all. It could therefore be argued that while cognitive extremism is not a sufficient condition

⁵² Borum, 'Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories', op. cit., p. 8.

⁵³ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, op. cit.; Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani. *Social movements: an introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005); Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising. Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2005).

⁵⁴ Abrahms, op. cit.; Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Wiktorowicz, op. cit.; Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, op. cit.

⁵⁶ Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, op. cit., p. 131.

⁵⁷ Neumann, 'The trouble with radicalization', op. cit.; Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, 'The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38:11 (2015), pp. 958-975.

⁵⁸ Snow, op. cit. 2004, 396

⁵⁹ Köhler, Daniel. 2015. *Contrast Societies. Radical Social Movements and their relationships with their target societies. A theoretical model*. Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression 7:1, 18-34

for violent extremism it is nevertheless a necessary condition, ‘a mental prerequisite’.⁶⁰ Borum’s statement that ‘ideology and action are sometimes connected, but not always’ certainly seems to be much too strong to be true.⁶¹

In some sense this leaves the question of what threshold of extremist beliefs needs to be reached so we can speak of cognitive extremism. Horgan is certainly clearly right to point out that engagement in extremist violence does not automatically prove some end-point of radicalisation has been reached.⁶² But to conversely assume that violent extremists ever not hold extremist beliefs at all seems like quite a stretch.

3.3. IS COGNITIVE EXTREMISM A GOOD PREDICTOR OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

If cognitive extremism is a necessary precursor for violent extremism, does knowing someone holds extremist views help us identify future jihadists? As noted earlier, the overwhelming percentage of cognitive extremists does not engage in violence. According to some researchers, the share is in fact so low that holding extremist views has an incredibly low base rate, which makes cognitive extremism a poor predictor of eventual violent extremism.⁶³ Sageman for example states that the base of jihadist terrorists in the U.S. is around 0.0006 per 100,000 per year.⁶⁴ It would probably be impossible to ever conduct a poll in which the rate of respondents expressing extremist views would ever be that low. Even the expression of terrorist intent does not help us as much as one might expect, because ‘there is so much loose talk and braggadocio among young, militant Muslims, who want to appear tough in front of their peers’.⁶⁵ Simply put, knowing that an individual holds extremists beliefs does not tell us whether that person will likely engage in violence in the future.

One explanation that has been suggested for the high number of cognitive extremists that do not become violent has been put forward by Jaskoski, Wilson and Lazareno, who

⁶⁰ Brian Michael Jenkins, ‘Building an Army of Believers: Jihadist Radicalization and Recruitment’, Testimony presented before the House Homeland Security Committee. RAND Cooperation (2007).

http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2007/RAND_CT278-1.pdf

⁶¹ Borum, ‘Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories’, op. cit., p. 30.

⁶² Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, op. cit.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*, op. cit.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 80-81.

emphasise crucial decisions taking during the teens and twenties.⁶⁶ They argue that even if individuals support violence they will be unlikely to become violent extremists after that “critical juncture”, because they “become institutionalized along a nonviolent path without embracing nonviolent ideals”. Therefore the authors suggest, it becomes less likely that they turn towards violent extremism later in life, even though there will of course be some exceptions.

But do we actually measure beliefs accurately enough to be able to tell whether cognitive extremism is a good predictor of violent extremism? There may be nuanced reasons not covered in poll and survey questions which explain why a large part of cognitive extremists does not turn towards violence. While we may be right in assuming that the ideas held by merely cognitive extremists and violent extremists are quite similar, there may be minor disagreements which make all the difference. Islamist extremists may differ from jihadists in the belief that the covenant with a liberal state should not be broken as long as Muslims are granted the freedom to practice their religion freely.

In a changed political context, it is not inconceivable that previously cognitive extremists start using violent methods to reach their goals. One example could be the great number of formerly not-violent Islamist extremists, who joined ISIS after it declared its caliphate. Their choice to join ISIS’s violent state-building project does not seem to have been caused by a change in beliefs, but rather by changing political circumstances. Whether cognitive extremism is really such a bad predictor of violent extremism or not, more accurate instruments to measure extremist beliefs with would certainly be of great interest.

4. CONCLUSION

Citizens in liberal democracies enjoy quite some freedom to hold opinions far removed from the mainstream of society. But if extremist beliefs lead to extremist behavior, the state should probably worry about the prevalence of such beliefs. It may not be illegal to have extremist

⁶⁶ Jaskoski, M., Wilson, M., & Lazareno, B. 2017. *Approving of but Not Choosing Violence: Paths of Nonviolent Radicals*. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1-18.

attitudes, but it is not obvious that liberal governments should therefore be indifferent about them. To the contrary, there may be a need for governments to get engaged in countering such beliefs. Accordingly, the question of whether cognitive and violent extremism are connected may have important policy implications.

This essay has investigated the link between cognitive and violent extremism. I have argued that cognitive extremism is not a sufficient, but a necessary precursor for violent extremism. Nevertheless, it is not a good predictor of who will actually engage in violence and radicalisation paths are often more complex than linear models suggest. In the previous sections, I detailed some of the effects that the ongoing debate about the connection between cognitive and violent extremism has had on the PREVENT strategy. While the first version of PREVENT funded extremist groups the government considered to be helpful for their counter-terrorism efforts, the revised version established shared values as a condition for government support. On the other hand, the second version clearly drew a line in between cognitive extremism and violent extremism.

There remain innumerable open questions worthy of further consideration and future research. As suggested in section 3.3., it would be of great interest to have more precise measurements of the attitudes of political radicals and extremists. Additionally, it should be investigated if and how unsophisticated understandings of an extremist organisation's ideology can influence behavior. Instead of scholars like Horgan and Borum downplaying the importance of ideological factors the focus should be more generally on how beliefs and ideas interact with other factors such as social bonds, identity, emotions, moral outrage, foreign policy, internal repression, need for belonging and status considerations. Another possible avenue of research could be whether there is a connection in between cognitive and violent extremism and a collective level. This essay was mostly about the connection on an individual level, which may be justified, given how idiosyncratic many radicalisation processes appear to be. Regardless, it might be the case that a higher prevalence of cognitive extremism among a given population also increases the level of violent extremism.

Another interesting avenue of future research would concern the role of beliefs in processes of disengagement from violent extremism. As with the paths towards violent

extremism, similar questions arise about which factors cause individuals to stop participating in acts of ideologically motivated violence. Some of the work done on this question so far addressed the potential of disengagement through a combination of framing that supported tactical disengagement and credible and effective social networks that could spread the disengagement frame without denouncing core ideological beliefs.⁶⁷

The implications for policies such as the PREVENT program have to remain somewhat speculative. Assuming Githens-Mazer and Lambert are correct in their assessment of the effectivity of programs such as STREET, governments need to ask themselves whether risking social cohesion, integration efforts and a rise of non-liberal attitudes is worth the beneficial counter-terrorism effects of such programs. Additionally, it needs to assess the long-term security implications of funding such programs. If there is a connection between illiberal or extremist beliefs and violent extremism on a collective level, the long-term security risks will probably exceed the short-term security benefits. On the other hand, the British government should critically evaluate whether their current strategy has defined the set of beliefs it aims to tackle too broadly, thereby hurting its own counter-radicalisation efforts as well as the relationship with Muslim communities.

⁶⁷ Clubb, Gordon. 2015. *De-radicalization, Disengagement and the Attitudes-Behavior Debate*. (London: Sage); Clubb, Gordon. 2016a. *The Role of Former Combatants in Preventing Youth Involvement in Terrorism in Northern Ireland: A Framework for Assessing Former Islamic State Combatants*. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39:9, 842-861.; Clubb, Gordon. 2016b. *Selling the end of terrorism: a framing approach to the IRA's disengagement from armed violence*. *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27:4, 608-635.

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