Defining the Concept of 'Violent Extremism'

Delineating the attributes and phenomenon
of violent extremism

Mathias Bak, Kristoffer Nilaus Tarp,
and Dr. Christina Schori Liang

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Security Policy**

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Contents

I. Introduction

During the last few decades, the concept of violent extremism (VE) has played an increasingly prominent role in policies and development programming on a global level. Having gone through several incarnations, the current focus for most actors deals with preventing and countering violent extremism. This terminology was constructed in an effort to repackage the Global War on Terror (GWOT) in a manner that shifted the focus away from the over-militarised responses of the 90s and early 2000s, to methods linked to social support and prevention. Where counter-terrorism focuses on countering terrorists through physical means, the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) approach aims to prevent the rise of violent extremist organisations (VEOs) through less militarised methods. P/CVE programs therefore aim at developing resilience among communities that may be prone to violent extremism. According to the 2015 UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, such interventions aim to address the root causes and drivers of violent extremism, which often include: socio-economic issues; discrimination; marginalization; poor governance; human rights violations; remnants of violent conflict; collective grievances; and other psychological factors.[1] The concept of violent extremism has also become increasingly mainstream in the international community, with both the UN Security Council (UNSC 2014)[2] and the UN General Assembly[3] (UNGA 2015) calling for member states to address VE.

In spite of being a concept recognised across the international community as one of the critical development challenges of our time, a uniform definition of VE – one that is able to ensure a shared understanding of the phenomenon it represents – does not exist.

In spite of being a concept recognised across the international community as one of the critical development challenges of our time, a uniform definition of VE – one that is able to ensure a shared understanding of the phenomenon it represents – does not exist. All-too-often, it appears that VE as a concept is framedas self-evident. This raises questions about whether subjective perceptions wind up influencing the responses and interventions currently designed to address the phenomenon.

The fact that interventions aimed at addressing VE are generally designed before the problem is actually delineated and defined is a strange anomaly. A 2017 report by Peace Direct based on insights from experts

in the peacebuilding field shows how: due to a lack of authoritative understanding around it, critics point out that the VE concept is not only easily manipulated and often politically contrived, but is frequently used to securitise a range of actors and development efforts in a myriad of ways.[4] Further criticism points to the use of VE as a conceptual tool deployed to legitimise and rationalise the continuation of the war on terror.[5]

Popular discourse on the topic, which commonly uses the word 'extremism' and 'terrorism' interchangeably, indeed adds to this confusion.[6/7] Some critics would even go so far as to argue that VE is a synonym to terrorism with 'cosmetic' improvements.[8] From a political standpoint this can potentially allow authoritarian regimes to (as is the case with terrorism) use the nomenclature of violent extremism to negatively label political opposition and divergent social movements in order to legitimise oppressive practices. Non-authoritarian regimes have also used the threat of VE to re-divert funding and attention towards what are often objectively less-serious issues. Consequently, from a development perspective, the proliferation of C/PVE discourse has made access to development funding for many NGOs and developing countries unequal, as donors could be more willing to put money into regions where the risk of violent extremism is the greatest.

Proponents of C/PVE interventions highlight that C/PVE methods are more flexible and engaging than counter terrorism interventions, particularly because VE poses a real challenge to human rights and sustainable development. By fixating on the word 'terrorism', development actors are forced to emphasise security interests over development, which often misses the point. According to Schmid (2012), the language of VE can describe various ideological types of political violence in a sensitive manner and, perhaps for exactly that reason, is much better at mobilising collective action than language centred on the more contentious word 'terrorism'.[9]

Harling, Simon, and Schonveld (2018) point out that both critics and proponents acknowledge the various shortcomings of the violent extremism concept. This includes the lack of available empirical knowledge regarding what works and what does not – a fact often pointed out by disillusioned aid workers and policy makers.[10] It is this challenge, in particular, that begs the question of whether it is even possible to measure something that is not truly defined.

This report will attempt to produce a definition that captures the most central characteristics of the types of violent extremism carried out by today's most prominent VEOs. As such, it will not be an attempt to deconstruct the concept of violent extremism or deny its usefulness. Instead, the objective will be to develop a definition which touches on key aspects of the violent extremism phenomenon, while also delineating the trend vis-à-vis other concepts such as radicalisation and terrorism.

VEOs frequently undertake a mode of state-building that is based partly on a quest for legitimacy and partly on fear, coercion and extreme brutality. The argument laid forward will emphasise VE partly as a political project in which state failure, the collapse of central government authority and the hardening of identity boundaries constitute opportunities for VEOs to build up their public authority and influence.

The paper will proceed as follows: First, the paper will present its findings, showing the most distinct characteristics of contemporary violent extremism; then a definition of VE will be composed and criteria for using VE as a label will be established. The following section will make a distinction between terms that are often used interchangeably, such as terrorism, radicalisation, insurgency and violent extremism. The subsequent section will analyse contemporary violent extremism to highlight which distinct attributes make VE a unique phenomenon. Following this, there will be a brief discussion regarding some of the organisations that remain in the 'grey zone' (or where there has been debate around their classification as violent extremists).

II. Findings

DISTINCT CHARACTERISTICS AND FEATURES OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Identity politics

Identity is central to most violent extremist organisations. Every individual carries a set of attributes that can be identified with a certain group. However, since the importance of identity markers is different in shifting contexts, the exact meaning of attributes such as race, ethnicity, customs, language and religion depend on specific circumstances. When looking at groups who operate from a platform based on identity politics, one identity is often elevated above all else, with the most common markers being religion, race and ethnicity. As such, VEOs typically exploit the core identity of groups in various ways and designate a specific marker of identity as the single defining feature of an individual. Other sources of differentiation are downplayed or denied. This way VEOs are able to cement group identities, strengthen intra-group bonds, reject all forms of syncretism and multiculturalism and simultaneously define and enforce rigid group boundaries. In other words, they welcome individuals only if they are considered 'one of their own' and construct, demarcate and institutionalise group dynamics.

VEOs acts of categorisation and collective representation of 'the other' create a culture of intolerance and disrespect, and ultimately securitises the very existence of groups outside their boundaries. VEOs often create narratives of injustice that include warnings of existential threats and a sense that individuals, or the group as a whole, are being deprived of their rightful status. Neuroscientists have extensively studied the neurological effects of emotions associated with feelings of deprivation and being threatened, and conclude that they may lead to more aggressive group behaviour.[11] VEOs make use of what Anthony D. Smith (1986) called 'myth-symbol complexes' [12] in their narratives. This involves a combination emotionally tied values, myths, memories and symbols that sit at the heart of identity formation.[13] This often explains why individuals are willing to support violent leaders, even when it goes against their personal well-being.[14] Petersen (2002) argues that these types of emotions are what cause individuals to shift from pursuing tangible interests – such as income – to intangible ideologies.[15] When these mythological narrative form, VEOs often mobilise them against 'the other'.

VEOs typically exploit the core identity of groups in various ways and designate a specific marker of identity as the single defining feature of an individual, while downplaying or denying other sources of differentiation.

Worth highlighting in the discussion about the role of identity in violent extremism is the way in which gender stereotypes are used and exploited to recruit members. The topic warrants greater discourse than what is possible in this paper; however, gender dynamics and social norms play a large role in not only the recruitment methods used by VEOs, but in the way violent extremism is discussed and dealt with by the international community. This paper will therefore contain a brief discussion of this topic as well.

Political projects

Violent extremism can also be described as a political project where VEOs seek to supplant the state and take the authority to govern upon themselves. They do so with differing effectiveness, and often fail to convert military success into efficient governance structures. Others, however, have been defeated through military interventions, not because local populations failed to accept their rule. McCants (2012) argues that violent extremists have a tendency to overreach in terms of their ambitions and, as a result, end up losing their territory;[16] although there are indicators that some VEOs choose to exercise pragmatism. In these instances, groups can indeed increase their ability to rule over time. Violent extremist political projects can also be implemented within the framework of state institutions – a strategy which tends to result in greater success. Through these avenues, it can be argued that violent extremists undertake some form of state-building, either by expunging the state to build alternative mechanisms of governing or by influencing the state directly.

VEOs often build their own versions of legitimacy and authority. In fact, they fit Lund's (2006) description of state-formation by so-called 'Twilight Institutions'.[17] They produce their own documents and narratives that support their claims, distribute or ensure services, and sometimes even collect taxes. In other words, they attempt to evolve attributes that mirror those of states.[18] When they do succeed in effective governance, however, VEOs have the potential to become more legitimate than their parent states, which may fundamentally change the meaning of citizenship for those who live in these areas.

While violent extremist groups share deliberate uses of fear, coercion and mass violence to legitimise or assert themselves with many other non-state armed groups, they do so not only for political gain, but as a result of a deeply felt inner identity that sits in conflict with anyone not sharing a similar identity. Armed non-state actors (ANSAs) may govern territory where the state does not,[19] but that may not equate violent extremism. Therefore, as mentioned, VE requires the employment of a mix of violence, coercion and mass atrocities, with incentives for obeying that take the form of service provisions delivered under the preface of ideological identities that leave no room for dissonance.

DEFINITION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Based on the characteristics explored throughout this paper, the following definition of Violent Extremism is proposed:

Violent extremism is a violent type of mobilisation that aims to elevate the status of one group, while excluding or dominating its 'others' based on markers, such as gender, religion, culture and ethnicity. In doing so, violent extremist organisations destroy existing political and cultural institutions, and supplant them with alternative governance structures that work according to the principles of a totalitarian and intolerant ideology.

According to this definition the following criteria must be met for a group to be identified as a violent extremism organisation:

1. *Totalitarianism and intolerance:* Violent extremist ideology legitimises subjugation and domination over other groups, thereby depriving them of their fundamental rights

2. *An anti-status quo political project:* violent extremism as a political project attempts to build new institutions and structures of governance, and either destroy those that exist or reform them in a fundamental manner.

3. *Use of violence:* Violent extremism goes beyond cognitive radicalisation, which only includes thoughts and beliefs. VE involves violent mobilisation and behaviour.In most – if not all – cases, the type of violence exercised exists at the extreme end of the spectrum, to include terrorism and, at times, genocide.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RADICALISATION, TERRORISM, INSURGENCY, AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

One of the most notable issues surrounding the development of a broad conceptual understanding of violent extremism involves the manner in which common discourse uses it interchangeably with concepts such as terrorism and radicalisation. Nasser-Edine et al. (2013) suggests that Violent Extremism is often used in a self-evident manner that takes unspecified features for granted,[20] while Harling, Simon, and Schonveld (2018) argue that, 'PVE's shortcomings start with the concept's very name. On one hand, 'violent extremism' – which emerged as a technical term preferable to the politically-charged notion of 'terrorism' – remains, like its predecessor, so vague as to be almost meaningless'.[21]

If violent extremism is not a synonym for terrorism, radicalisation or insurgency, its characteristics must differ. Thus, in order to make clear distinctions, predominant interpretations of these concepts are explained below.

Radicalisation

According to Schmid (2013), defining the term radicalisation is just as arbitrary as attempting to define the term violent extremism.[22] However, most agencies, governments and scholars agree on two prominent features: (1) radicalisation is a *process* of adopting, changing or strengthening a set of ideas that are outside, or in opposition to, some of society's mainstream ideas;[23] and (2) radicalisation is not guaranteed to manifest in violence.[24] One oft-cited model that attempts to describe the radicalisation process is Moghadam's (2005) 'staircase.'[25] In his article, *The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration*, he indicates that six steps of the staircase symbolise increasing alienation towards one's society. As that alienation grows, the staircase narrows, revealing a reduced set of alternatives that allows violence to develop over time.[26]

Another distinction, according Neumann (2013), suggests that radicalisation has both behavioural and cognitive end-points.[27] While cognitive radicalisation refers to an individual adopting a specific mind-set involving particular *thoughts*, behavioural radicalisation refers to mind-sets that lead to violent *actions*. Radicalisation is therefore the *process* by which an individual or movement becomes extremist, though not necessarily violent.[28] Many individuals and groups framed as radical have been devotedly non-violent.

Terrorism

Like the terms violent extremism and radicalisation, the term terrorism is also a source of debate and controversy. Terrorism is frequently used in a pejorative manner to stigmatise and delegitimise opponents.[29] This tends to classify it as an issue that is 'in the eyes of the beholder' particularly since, as the adage goes, 'One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.'

According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, terrorism is '[T]he unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims.'[30] Striegher (2017) points out that there is widespread agreement in the international community that terrorism exists and further agreement that it includes a physical act of some kind.[31] However, providing an accurate account of the debate around who is a terrorist or which aspects of terrorism should be emphasised continues to be a challenge.

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Insurgency

While comparing modern day C/PVE discourse to that of 20th century counterinsurgency doctrines, Harling, Simon, and Schonveld (2018) point to an apparent continuum between the two.[32] The central aim of movements focused on both C/PVE and counterinsurgency is to neutralize threats to society posed by violent extremist groups through the application of a combination of direct force, local allies and a focus on 'winning hearts and minds.' Thus, the authors continue to suggest that C/PVE epitomises the security-development nexus of the 21st century with the integration of coercive measures, human rights discourse and development practice.[33] Clearly, many potential overlaps continue to exist between insurgency and violent extremism, as both can denote some kind of revolt; however, according to the U.S. Army's counter-insurgency manual, '...the most basic form [of insurgency] is a struggle for control and influence, generally from a position of relative weakness, outside existing state institutions.'[34] Like terrorism, insurgency is a specific tactic employed by extremist organisations, indicating that, while often conflated, it is not synonymous with violent extremism.

Violent extremism

It is therefore important to develop an understanding of how extremism and violent extremism can be distinguished from radicalisation, terrorism and insurgency. Of the definitions that are available, VE is conceptualised as both an ideology and a set of actions. For example, in 2017, the Australian government defined VE as '...the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals. This includes terrorism and other forms of politically motivated and communal violence'.[35] This definition, however, has a number of problems. First, it does not make a distinction between behaviour and cognition (i.e. between engaging in acts of physical violence and maintaining or showing attitudinal support). Second, it is not uncommon for people to approve of violence by some actors – such as the police – in order to reach a particular political or ideological goal (e.g. the sovereignty of the state and the sanctity of the law), while shunning similar levels of violence from other actors.

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Moreover, although violent extremism is often related to terrorism when used as an ideological motivator, a justification, or a strategic tool, it does not necessarily comply with more narrow definitions of terrorism. As some analysts argue, both terrorism and violent extremism achieve ideological goals through violence, but terrorism is somewhat sporadic and aimed at spreading fear.[36] Violent extremism, as this paper will continue to argue, is orchestrated in a much more constant fashion.

Schmid (2013) claims that extremists – including ones who are not themselves participating in violence – are radicalised political actors who disregard the idea of a common set of ethics meant to restrain behaviour.[37] It is worth noting, however, that violent extremist ideologies often refer to ethics as the moral basis for their actions, even if their conception of what is ethical may differ from commonly held social norms. Extremists frequently work towards collective goals that are often identified by ideological dogmas; however, they conversely tend to downgrade or deny individual liberties. For this reason, violence, subjugation and suppression is often permitted towards individuals whose ideologies are perceived to diverge from the collective belief system.[38] In an earlier paper, *Countering Violent Extremism: A promising Response to Terrorism,* Schmid (2012)

suggests that the political programmes of extremists typically contain a number of elements, including: a mix of authoritarianism and anti-pluralism; collective goals that no one can opt out of, as well as a focus on uniformity over diversity; fanaticism and intolerance; a methodology to reach goals where the ends will always justify the means; and an extensive use of political violence against opponents and a rejection of attempts meant to persuade or promote dialogue.[39]

It can be argued that many institutions share one or more of these characteristics. However, another unique attribute of violent extremism is that it often, if not always, shirks compromise and focuses solely on changing others. In this zero-sum game, its greater cause is viewed as incompatible with the objectives of other groups, making negotiation difficult.

It is also important to note that violent extremism may come in a variety of political, ethnic, and religious forms that are not exclusive to any one group. Nonetheless, the concept of violent extremism is frequently used while referencing organisations from Islamic contexts. In the UN General Assembly's 2015 *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism,* violent extremism is:

...a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition. It is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality or system of belief. Nevertheless, in recent years, terrorist groups such as ISIL, Al-Qaida and Boko Haram have shaped our image of violent extremism and the debate on how to address this threat. These groups' message of intolerance – religious, cultural, social – has had drastic consequences for many regions of the world.[40]

While violent extremism tends to be an ambiguous concept, it is generally easy to grasp which organisations meet the criteria, particularly when looking at the VEOs specifically mentioned in the UN's *Plan of Action*. As ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram continue to maintain a consistent presence at the forefront of the violent extremism discussion, it is logical to assume that VE must have something to do with the particular practices of these organisations. With this in mind, the report will conduct an analysis of the characteristics comprising each organisation.

DISTINCT CHARACTERISTICS AND ATTRIBUTES THAT MAKE VIOLENT EXTREMISM A UNIQUE PHENOMENON

It is important to note, once again, that violent extremism is not a phenomenon exclusive to Islamist groups. Organisations such as the Grey Wolves (Turkey), the Golden Dawn (Greece) and the Ku Klux Klan (U.S.) have characteristics that classify them as violent extremist organisations. Hindu nationalism also exists and is responsible for large amounts of communal violence in India.[41] While the current state of world affairs lends itself to the conflation of violent extremism with Islam, understanding the ubiquitous

nature of extremism and the potential for groups of all religions, belief systems, and races to become violent is key to understanding the VE concept as a whole. To further this point, the paper will discuss the characteristics shared by archetypical, often Islamic, VEOs throughout the world.

While the current state of world affairs lends itself to the conflation of violent extremism with Islam, understanding the ubiquitous nature of extremism and the potential for groups of all religions, belief systems, and races to become violent is key to understanding the VE concept as a whole.

Jihadist violence have emerged in different configurations during the last decades. From the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan during the 90s to the current 'fourth wave' of jihad.[42/43] Most of these VEOs share the aim of restoring the primacy of a particularly puritanical expression of Sunni Islam in society, seek the establishment of a new Caliphate and perceive current regimes(as well as the international order that sustains the present nation-state system) as anti-islamic.[44] One source of divergence involves the question of whether, and to what extent, their theology allows violence against fellow Muslims. ISIS subscribes to the historically rare doctrine of 'takfirism', which allows the organisation to accuse other Muslims of apostasy in order to legitimise violence against those considered to be Kafir Muslims, or 'unbelievers'. Many times, those given this classification are Shiites or Sufis who follow a different branch of Islam or those who they believe act in opposition to Islam as a whole.[45] Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, tends to focus on Kafirs who are not Muslim, but they also target Shiites who they view as heretics attempting to destroy Islam (possibly in favour of the restoration of Middle Eastern Persian imperialism).[46]

Uniformity, intolerance and violence as identity making

Perhaps one of the most distinct and well-known characteristics of today's most prominent VEOs is the extent of their brutality. Almost all VEOs discussed in this report have been accused of mass atrocities specifically targeted against ethnic and religious minorities. According to Amnesty International and the UN, these types of atrocities can be classified as ethnic cleansing,[47] crimes against humanity, and genocide.[48] However, due to their complex nature, finding agreement within the international community continues to be a challenge.

Based on traits such as ethnicity, religion, race, cultural customs, etc., violence raises boundaries between groups, leading to a strengthened sense of separation between the 'other' and the 'self'. Thus, according to Conversi (1999), the most potent way of creating and cementing group identities is through the perpetration of violence.[49] This was the case in the aftermath of the war in former Yugoslavia, where the common language until 1989 was Serbo-Croat. By the mid-90s, however, multiple new and distinct languages emerged as people living in Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia began to speak differing dialects - likely as a result of the conflict.[50] Conversi (1999) also touches upon Rwanda, where violence was able to create separation between the Hutu and Tutsi populations, even though the two groups widely shared the same religion, customs, cultural norms, and traditions.[51] In these cases, and in many other parts of the world, what is often viewed as 'group consciousness' is actually the result of inter- or intra-state violence that creates boundaries later mistaken for cultural differences.[52] Thus, violence on a massive scale can serve as a tool for a kind of nation-building that draws lines between groups that would otherwise be considered similar. Through acts of violenceVEOs create stronger boundaries between groups within society, as well as strengthened dichotomies between 'us' and 'them'. This is not, however, the only reason for the employment of brutal tactics by contemporary VEOs. In the influential book *The Management of Savagery*, Al-Qaeda ideologue and strategist Abu Bakr Naji, delivers a detailed guide on how to transition society into an Islamic state though the use of ongoing brutality meant to tear down government institutions and authority.[53] According to Naji, the withering of state power will cause anarchy – or 'savagery' – which creates the ideal condition under which jihadists can build up their own structures of public influence.[54/55] Naji describes the so-called 'Path towards Empowerment',[56] in which he lays out three distinct phases in the process of gaining legitimate authority. Tthe first phase consists of disrupting and exhausting the enemy through terrorist actions and insurgency. By using exhaustion as evidence of success, young people will become more attracted to a life of adventure and power. The second phase consists of the 'management of barbarism', where the Mujahidin will seek to establish order and security, provide public services, build efficient management structures and enforce Sharia law. The final phase involves continuation of the management of barbarism on an increased level that includes violence and attacks carried out in an effort to establish networks between different small extremist entities.[57] A number of contemporary analysts and media outlets indeed claim Naji's work is instrumental to the understanding of contemporary violent extremism, as evidenced by its broad distribution among groups such as ISIS.[58/59/60]

The brutality of contemporary VEOs is therefore a part of a bigger strategy in which disruption of state order and the creation of conditions of anarchy gradually merge with attempts at political management. In order to further describe some of the characteristics of how violent extremist ideologies are converted into everyday rule, the report will now look into how different violent extremist actors manifest themselves.

Violent extremism as state-building

The factors that have contributed to the rise of the Islamic State (IS) are many, so describing them in detail is not within the scope of this report. However, according to Al-Nidawi (2014) and Haddad (2016), the rise was, in part, enabled by a range of permissive conditions that include ethno-sectarian grievances and extractive institutions that fuelled a growing sense of injustice.[61/62] Consequently, when the Islamic State rose in Iraq, its objective was not to terrorise the Iraqi state into undertaking reform but to dissolve it altogether and build an Islamic state in its place.

Thus, the Islamic State became a VEO that developed the necessary capacities to wield public authority. Rather thanww only carrying out sporadic terrorist attacks, it launched a full-on assault on existing institutions, as well as divergent groups of people and religions, in order to both destroy the foundations currently in place and to build a new polity based on strict ideological purity.

In earlier days of IS rule there seems to be some evidence that the concept of establishing an Islamic state was not exclusively a hated phenomenon. Wilgenburg (2014) highlights the fact that, initially, after the fall of Mosul, reports recounted how ISIS was seen by segments of the population as either liberators or, in many ways, somewhat better than a dysfunctional state with an abusive army.[63]

It also seemed that the organisation was able to translate their military victories into public authority. Malik (2015) point to a leaked manual for bureaucrats within the Islamic State, which reveals a picture of an organisation attempting to cement its authority by engaging in institution-building, public service provision and tax collection.[64] Each province controlled by ISIS in Syria was assigned with an emir with a number of deputies organising local administrative functions such as courts, education systems, health services, telecommunications, electricity provisions etc.[65] ISIS legitimised itsclaims to rule by consistently referencing Islamic history and Quranic passages.[66]

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terrorist attacks, it launched a full-on assault on existing institutions, as well as divergent groups of people and religions, in order to both destroy the foundations currently in place and to build a new polity based on strict ideological purity. The Islamic State, therefore, engaged in a form of state-building not entirely unlike the process described by Abu Bakr Naji.

In other places, Al-Qaeda or other IS-inspired groups have attempted to undertake similar projects. In general, they appear to be less successful in terms of building resilient structures of public authority and many have also had trouble acquiring territory or strengthening their governance abilities. Even so, some characteristics of the Islamic State appear to persist in other movements, with Al-Qaeda's shift in vision being a prime example. According to a 2016 special report on the relationship between Al-Qaeda and ISIS, the International Crisis Group suggests that international terrorism is less of a focus for Al-Qaeda, as the movement has begun to address more local priorities, including capturing, governing territory and targeting existing institutions.[67]

Al-Shabaab is another group that held significant territorial control in East Africa between 2007 and 2011. Although not to the extent of the Islamic State, it is clear that the organisation has been able to develop some limited governance functions[68]-characteristics showing the ability to exercise public authority and supplanting local and state government institutions. During the height of its power, Al-Shabaab's continued to provide the population with some basic essential services that the government failed to deliver. This included Quranic schools, access to health care, predictable economic regulation, conflict dispute mechanisms and safety. At present, despite a loss of territory and power as a whole, Al-Shabaab continues to maintain influence in many rural areas by manipulating local tensions and grievances, and playing on community fears of exploitation by government allies. The UNDP (2017) further points out the organisation is also adept at manipulating and recruiting marginalised and economically insecure youth.[69] This has allowed it to co-opt certain communities into its governance structures while simultaneously raising the cost of not complying with its decrees.

Another VEO, the Taliban, seems eager to not only advance militarily but to govern territory. Over the past few years, the organisation has been able to conquer and control a number of districts and provinces across Afghanistan. According to Weigand (2017), the Taliban occasionally appears more effective in responding to local demands for certain services than the Afghan central government. Among these, the Taliban can at times be a more accessible and fair source of local conflict resolution.[70] The Taliban seems determined to act as a legitimate authority and can - in certain cases - be bestowed by those living within its territory as a legitimate entity.[71]

Boko Haram, the self-proclaimed caliphate in northern Nigeriais, in some ways, quite dissimilar from most other VEOs. It has been mostly, if not

entirely, incapable of responding to community needs.[72] Despite the fact that, in Nigeria's northern region, it was able to utilize widespread frustration and anger over corruption and inequality, analysts note that its current rule is largely based on cruelty and coercion, which yields little support from local communities. At the height of its power, the authors state that Boko Haram included 26 local governments.[73]

Another persistent group in the Sahel region is Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its multiple affiliates and offshoots, which include the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Al Mourabitoun and Ansar al Dine. These organisations have appealed to various grievances in Mali's northern region relating to ethnicity, race and class. Moreover, according to McCants (2012), they have been successful in responding to local worries by providing basic services like policing and general health care.[74] AQIM has also had the ability to offer economic inducements,[75] have used its service provisions to claim legitimacy as well as the right to undertake more draconian measures, such as forced recruitment and strict implementation of Sharia law. While AQIM and its affiliates have taken heavy personnel, supply and territorial losses after western-backed military offenses, they remain a threat to Mali and the region as a whole.[76]

It is important to note that, while many of the organisations highlighted in this report are considered Sunni groups, violent extremism also exists outside Sunni sects. Shia militias often have sectarian agendas across the Middle East, particularly in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, where these sectarian have touted military victories. Many of these organisations seek to spark revolutions modelledafter the Iranian Revolution and promote distinct, Shiite versions of Islamic revivalism.[77] Groups such as Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) can be described as socio-political movements that build political legitimacy by framing themselves as protectors of Shia Muslims, in addition to their ability to provide security and other social services.[78] After the fall of Saddam Hussein, for example, the inability of the coalition forces in Iraq to perform service delivery tasks in a satisfactory manner enabled groups like Muqtada al Sadr in Baghdad to develop more complex mechanisms for governance, service delivery and political reform, as well as functioning machinery for the provision of public policing, food assistance, health care and education.[79]

Some Shiite militias – like the ones in Iraq – have also shown a willingness to work within public institutions and have disguised their occasional attempts to undermine them. Many such organisations, like the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Sadrist movement, have also employed non-violent, grassroots ways of dealing with political contention, and have generally been rather pragmatic. While this may be a testament to violence not being an explicitly central tactic, violence still forms a large part of their repertoire and behaviour. For instance, the armed faction of Iraq's so-called 'Wolf Brigade' has explicitly targeted

Sunnis in an attempt to purge what they claim to be Shia neighbourhoods. Thurber (2014) points to its production of a popular reality television show, entitled 'Terrorists in the Grip of Justice', which broadcast 'interrogations' of Sunnis.[80] Since then, an Amnesty International (2014) report on militia rule in Iraq suggests that sectarianism has escalated and many of the Shia militias operating across the state have been deliberate perpetrators of ethno-sectarian violence.[81] This has invoked fear among the enemies of these groups as well as respect among parts of their constituencies.[82]

It is notable that these groups have greater incentive to capture or direct the state, rather than to destroy it. The state, at least in the current political context, is the platform through which these groups wield their influence and, at best, can be used to implement their political and social program. Their end product is not lawlessness per se but is more akin to 'Shia-centric state-building' (Haddad 2016).[83] In this sense Shia militias behave and operate much like their Sunni nemeses. Both conduct state-building, although, in the case of the Shiite militias, extremist ideology can be implemented within the framework of the existing state.

Violent extremism's gendered aspects

A less widely discussed characteristic of many VEOs is the use of a specific form of gendered politics.

> Our beliefs about the innate goodness of women has a tendency to promote a faulty paradigm, which incorrectly assumes that women who choose to deviate from their expected gender norms do so only on rare occasions and as a result of manipulation or force.

While indeed many VEOs engage in forced marriages, sexual violence, and kidnapping to consolidate their power,[84] women are more than mere passive victims. Recognising the role that VEOs have played in the very real victimisation of women, Sjoberg and Gentry (2016) challenge the notion that *all* women working within these organisations do so against their will. Our beliefs about the innate goodness of women has a tendency to promote a faulty paradigm, which incorrectly assumes that women who choose to deviate from their expected gender norms do so only on rare occasions and as a result of manipulation or force.[85] In reality, a majority of research suggests that the active participation of women in violent extremist

movements is not new or rare[86] and that VEOs intentionally exploit gender dynamics in the service of their objectives.

Typical gender stereotypes are used to target both women and men during the recruitment process of VEOs.[87] Analysis of the Islamic State's propaganda materials suggests that women are specifically targeted by focusing on their desire to not only increase their own social and political agency,[88] but to address their perceived exclusion within society.[89] According to Myers (2018), gender inequality is central to the propagation of violent extremism, which has allowed VE groups to not only capitalise on and profit from the subjugation of women, but to weaponise their desire to seek empowerment through increased access to the public sphere[90] and opportunities for greater political engagement.[91] By depicting themselves as champions of women and women's voices, VEOs use targeted emotional messaging to pursue women who not only desire adventure and a sense of community,[92] but who sympathise with narratives of victimisation of their group.[93] Focusing on the gendered needs and specific desires of women within their communities allow VEOs to reap tactical advantages related to the fact that women are less likely to raise suspicion or to be searched by authorities.[94]

Stereotypical gender roles are also utilised to shame men who do not engage in violent behaviour, which fosters male insecurity by suggesting that appropriate expressions of anger or frustration must include violence.

Stereotypical gender roles are also utilised to shame men who do not engage in violent behaviour. This fosters male insecurity by suggesting that appropriate expressions of anger or frustration must include violence.[95] Michael Kimmel (2018), who interviewed over 100 former violent extremists, discusses the fact that each man he interviewed felt emasculated by the failings of government, corporations, and society as a whole.[96] VEOs intentionally target these men by exploiting a sense of shame and feelings of victimisation by providing them with an alternate worldview that allows them to seek empowerment through acts of violence.[97] It is important, however, that the victimisation of women be addressed when looking at the ways in which male stereotypes are exploited, particularly since, according to International Alert, violent extremist recruits are often attracted through the reinforcement of socio-cultural norms surrounding sex.[98] According to Zenn and Pearson (2014), this strategy is particularly poignant when looking at Boko Haram and ISIS, and their use of kidnapping and gender-based violence as a tactical and punitive weapon of terror and control.[99] By offering women and girls as sexual trophies or providing avenues for men to

easily access sex, VEOs are not only able to promote narratives related to masculine entitlement, but are able to utilise gender as a political pawn,[100] further enabling them to maintain power and control.

THE GREY ZONE: WHO ARE VIOLENT EXTREMISTS AND WHO ARE NOT

While it's important to discuss what qualifies as violent extremism, it is just as vital to highlight what is *not* violent extremism. This section, therefore, will briefly discuss violent extremism's grey zones and some of the movements that are located at, below and above the VEO threshold.

One of the more controversial cases involves The Syrian Democratic Forces, which is the umbrella organisation covering a multitude of Syrian opposition-groups from different ethnicities and religions in the Rojava region of northeast Syria (West Kurdistan). It is de-facto spearheaded by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (known by its Kurdish abbreviation PYD) which seeks to implement the ideology of democratic confederalism.[101] Democratic confederalism is the left-wing ideology of PKK-founder Abdullah Öcalan, which stresses a grassroots form of direct democracy, emphasises gender equality and is extremely sceptical of neoliberalism. Khalaf (2017) also notes that the PYD distributes services with great efficiency, covering effective policing, multilingual education, health care, infrastructure reconstruction and electricity.[102]

Internally in the Rojava region, critics of the so-called 'Rojava revolution' or 'Rojava project', which began in 2012, claim that there is a considerable gap between the ideology of democratic confederalism and its actual implementation. While indeed dominated by Kurds and Kurdish ideology, the PYD considers itself ethnically inclusive and formally allows Syriacs, Armenians, Turkmens, Assyrians, Kurds and Arabs to participate in the political process. Nevertheless, it is often suggested that some Arabs feel alienated, and Kurdish factions linked to former Iraqi-Kurdish ruling parties claim that they are only partly able to challenge the political dominance of the PYD and the leading ruling coalition.[103] It is also noted that some also blame the PYD for monopolizing the provision of public services, thus consolidating its own authority.[104]

The PYD's ties to the Turkish Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) – which is a source of heated debate – as well as the fact that it is a Kurdish-majority polity, has made Turkey label it a VEO, though it mostly describes it as a terrorist organisation.[105] The fear of Kurdish influence in Syria has led the Turks to sanction and, at the time of writing, undertake military actions against the PYD.[106] Turkey has also had success in shutting the Syrian Democratic Council (the political wing of the SDF, in which PYD plays a major role) out of the Geneva peace talks in what appear to be an attempt at disenfranchising PYD-linked actors from peace negotiations.[107]

The Rojava project, however, cannot be considered a case of violent extremism. On one hand it does indeed carve out geopolitical space for itself and the PYD have established systems of public authority. However, the SDF and the PYD do not advocate uniformity and thus cannot be considered totalitarian in a way that qualifies is as a VEO. In fact, it continues to be an anti-status quo political project that promotes ethnic and religious pluralism, as well as women's liberation. Moreover, the PYD nor does it harbour, at least officially, the aim of secession from Syria.[108] Although there have been accusations of unnecessary heavy-handedness towards supposed IS supporters, the kind of violence that the PYD and its militias (YPG and YPJ) have undertaken has not been near the level of the other violent extremist groups discussed in this paper. More importantly, the beliefs and actions espoused by the PYD and SDF – which includes the establishment of a political architecture that provides greater rights to minorities in post-conflict Syria – are diametrically opposed to the totalitarianism and uniformity of violent extremism.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB), a very different unarmed group founded by Hassan Al Banna in 1928, also operates in a sort of grey zone and has built its support network by providing social services to Egyptians in need. Today, the MB has become one of the world's most influential pan-Islamic movements, which, according to a 2017 interview with the MB deputy chairman in Egypt, aims to make the Quran and Sunnah a primary reference point for all layers of society.[109] By referencing these sources, the MB believes political participation will be enhanced. Consequently, the group denounces all violent acts and, according to their own public information, believes in the freedom of assembly and democracy.[110]

Despite the MB's effort to foster social welfare and a promotion – at least in word – of democratic principles, the group has been classified as a terrorist organisation by Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, who believe the group's practices are terrorist driven.[111] As a consequence of the current political climate in Egypt, MB claims that its designation has more to do with attempts to delegitimise its credibility than it has to do with actual realities; however, Hamid (2017) further suggests that there continue to be signs that the movement is radicalising.[112] Trager (2017) references the increasingly common tendency for MB members to claim that non-Muslims (such as Copts; an ethnoreligious group native to Egypt that represents the largest Christian denomination in the region) support Egypt's political developments.[113] In the wake of one the many recent attacks on Copts in 2017, Trager (2017) also points to a social media statement made by el-Moghir, a prominent young member of the Muslim Brotherhood: 'Christians are paying the price for their alliance with the Egyptian regime, and there is no solution for them but to step back and reconcile with Muslims or their blood will continue to run like rivers and nobody will care.'[114]

In a separate article, Trager also highlights the fact that individual MB members (that is members acting in their individual capacities) have taken up arms, mostly in response to Egyptian state repression.[115] He also states that the Brotherhood as a whole has often failed to distance itself from violent extremism by lending ideological support to the radicalisation of individuals.[116] Some of the Brotherhood's sympathisers have also played a part in various acts of violence, and groups that follow the MB ideology have emerged – such as Hasm and Liwa al-Thawra – that have conducted their own violent attacks.

Nonetheless,the Muslim Brotherhood is not known for direct involvement in any terrorist actions or organised forms of VE and, from an official standpoint, continue to condemn violence.[117] For this reason, the Brotherhood's actions should not been labelled as violent extremism, although segments of the Brotherhood increasingly appears to be akin to a 'hate group'.[118] Moreover, currently the Brotherhood is not involved in any exercise of constituting parallel state functions. Thus, the group does not share some of the fundamental characteristics of other VEOs. Hounshell and Toosi (2017) argue that labelling the Muslim Brotherhood a VEO could further exclude the organisation from a legal means of participation in politics, ultimately providing it with fewer alternatives for the scapegoating of religious minorities and justifying increased levels of violence throughout Egypt.[119] A final case for discussion involves several militant Buddhist nationalist groups in Myanmar, which consist of a variety of socio-political parties – working more or less in service of the same goal – including the 969 Movement, the MaBaTha and the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP).

According to van Klinken and Aung (2017), each of the aforementioned groups proclaim to be fiercely anti-Muslim, strongly committed to ethno-religious 'purity', and to be the defenders of the allegedly threatened 'Sasana' (the community of Buddhism).[120] Their political project has often led to the exclusion of various minorities whose loyalty to the idea of Myanmar as a Burmese Buddhist nation is in question. In many cases, such minorities are stripped of their citizenship rights altogether and are excluded from meaningful participation in national politics, resulting in persistent ethnic conflict in Myanmar's peripheries.[121] The scapegoating of Muslims is not a new phenomenon in Myanmar, as waves of violence against Muslim populations have shown periods of resurgence during the late 70s (with the Naga Min operation), the early 90s (when citizens of the Rakhine state were punished for uprisings in 1988), in 2001 (following the Global War on Terror) and during recent political transitions beginning in 2010.[122] Muslims and the Rohingya minority have indeed often been targeted by discriminatory policies and hateful propaganda, as evidenced by the way they are consistently described as 'Bengalis' or immigrants from Bangladesh.[123] Violence over the last few years, however, has seemed particularly extreme.

In general, the current violence in Myanmar's state of Rakhine is not only severe, but appears to be at the service of a larger nation-and state-building vision.[124] However, the role played by each of the actors in the communal violence targeted at the Rohingya people has been difficult to assess since it often appears to be spontaneous and disorganised. It is probable that the narratives fuelling the abuse stems from monks like U Wirathu[125] who, according to Time Magazine (2013), leads the 969 movement and speaks widely about the importance of maintaining Buddhist purity in an effort to rid Myanmar of the 'Muslim threat'.[126] Even so, hate narratives alone only qualify a group to be labelled as extremist, rather than *violent* extremist.

The militant organisations in Myanmar involve a variety of layers, making it difficult to assess exactly which groups are responsible for which incidents.

The militancy behind current atrocities in Myanmar involve a variety of layers, making it difficult to assess exactly which groups are responsible for which incidents.[127] Nevertheless, when viewed as a wider collective movement, the extreme Burmese right can be characterised as violent extremist which functions – like many of the groups described previously – as a socio-political movement.[128] This collective group tends to work in cooperation with elements of the recognised state, which provides a framework that can be used to build the organisation's own political programme (MaBaTha has been at the forefront of this movement). The 'purity' stressed by these groups involves strict uniformity that seeks to supplant cultural practices, which is visible in the way the Rohingya culture, and its Islamic influence, has been entirely erased from parts of the Rakhine state. This is indeed a manifestation of their political vision.These are but examples. The definition of violent extremism that this paper has proposed can potentially be held up against any historical or contemporary organisation. Any large movement that has attempted to implement an intolerant and radically different political order through extensive use of violence can be tested against these criteria. Little of what this paper describes is new and the great ideologies of the 20th century produced many such movements

III. Conclusion

Current conceptions of P/CVE tend to be dictated and sometimes instrumentalised by political considerations. Through an analysis we have argued that violent extremism, on one hand, is exceptionally brutal and is undertaken in a deliberate attempt to spread chaos. On the other hand, it is also used as a means to foster state-building that is conducive to a specific ideology as well as to build and strengthen social boundaries. To capture the behaviour of prominent VEOs, the following definition, first presented at the beginning of the paper, best exemplifies the essence of violent extremism:

Violent extremism is a violent type of mobilisation that aims to elevate the status of one group, while excluding or dominating its 'others' based on markers, such as gender, religion, culture and ethnicity. In doing so, violent extremist organisations destroy existing political and cultural institutions, and supplant them with alternative governance structures that work according to the principles of a totalitarian and intolerant ideology.

This definition highlights the political nature of the VE phenomenon, as well as its use of violent force to gain power.Thus, interventions against it must consider the unique regional and political forces at play, while also emphasizing the importance of strengthening social dynamics. As was described, VEOs use a deadly combination of local grievances and rehearsed narratives to lure its followers deeper into a complex, insular and disturbing world. It is therefore important to continue studying both the concept itself and develop a better awareness of engaging and empowering all stakeholders in the community be they women, youth, religious leaders, medical professionals, government and the private sector to push back against violent extremism. Violent extremism will only be challenged by designing and carrying out inclusive and effective multi-disciplinary and multi-agency approaches. Attempts to combat the totalitarian and intolerant nature of VEOs has been addressed through programming that enhance the capacity of individuals and community service organisations (CSOs) to engage in preventive dialogue. While such practices may be helpful in establishing a form of cohesion that prevents VE ideology from entering the mainstream and reducing inter-group information asymmetries that lead to group-based security dilemmas, few believe such engagements will reach the most adamant violent extremists. To truly put an end to the scale of VE that exists in the world today, the political project of violent extremism and the opportunity structures it exploits must be addressed.

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