

Policy Briefing

Ideology: the driving force behind radicalisation?

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Brussels, Belgium

On 1 February 2017, the European Foundation for Democracy, in collaboration with TRENDS Research & Advisory, hosted a policy briefing entitled: "Ideology: the driving force behind radicalisation?". Throughout the discussion, experts commented on the role that ideology plays in fostering extremism, analysing the shortcomings of current analyses and practices, and suggesting a new approach to tackle radicalisation.

Guest Speakers included: Roberta Bonazzi, President of the European Foundation for Democracy (Moderator); Ahmed Al Hamli, President of TRENDS Research & Advisory; Saad Amrani, Chief Commissioner of the Belgian Federal Police; Richard Burchill, Director of Research, TRENDS Research & Advisory; and Mohamad Khadam Aljamee, Secretary of the Union of Syrians Abroad.

The event was held at Info Point Europa, and comprised a significant number of EU officials and policy-makers and academics, with approximately 40 people attending.

The Islamist ideology as a main factor of radicalisation

All speakers agreed that attempts to profile extremists on the basis of socio-economic and geographical origins have failed. The main driving factor of extremism, according to them, is to be found in ideology and the role it plays in radicalising individuals.

As concerns the Islamist ideology, panellists stressed that it is driven by a political view of religion. Richard Burchill observed how its strength derives from the idea of building an Islamic utopia in this world, as an anticipation of that of the afterlife. This ideal system is based on God's commandments and regulations, and as such is exempt from the burden of proof on its feasibility or desirability, he said. The combination of perceived real world grievances with the promise of a religious utopia creates an explosive mix, which is the main source of radicalisation, he added.

Panellists agreed however that Western analysts often fail to grasp the religious nature of this ideology, although religion is fundamental and constitutes a very powerful driving force in this context.

One of the panellists traced the penetration of religious extremism to the 1970s in Europe and North Africa alike: radical actors found fertile ground with intellectually inexperienced people,

and resorted to the means at their disposal (building mosques, preaching, publishing radical material and later fully exploiting the digital media) in order to promote a divisive and hateful discourse based on the distinction between the "good" and the "bad" - where the latter include non-Muslims and Muslims alike, if not conforming to Islamists' conservative views.

Most panellists mentioned Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood as relevant examples, stressing that those share the same goals of ISIS, i.e. the creation of an Islamic state, only differing as to the means of achieving it.

It was further highlighted that the phenomenon is even more dangerous currently, due to the Syrian refugee crisis, creating favourable conditions for Islamist groups to exploit the plight of vulnerable people in order to drive them towards radical ideologies.

Conclusions and Recommendations: separate religion from ideology by empowering liberal-democratic actors

A key message that emerged from the discussion is the necessity of drawing a clear line between a radical ideology with a political agenda and Islam as a faith. Indeed, as Ahmed Al Hamli stressed, while Islamist groups denounce all those exposing their goals as enemies or haters of Islam, fighting their *political* ideology does not mean being against Islam. It is, on the contrary, opposing a divisive, anti-democratic and intolerant discourse which is actually highjacking Islam.

All speakers agreed on the need to encourage both governments and non-Islamist Muslims alike to oppose these kinds of groups which, by their actions, can give Muslims a bad name, which itself can lead to Muslims more generally being discriminated against.

Roberta Bonazzi emphasised the role of civil society in this struggle and the need to empower liberal-democratic actors so as to strengthen resilience of vulnerable communities. She made clear that radicals should not be empowered, whether violent or non-violent, in the same way one would not entrust far-right extremists with de-radicalisation of neo-Nazis.

All panellists agreed on the fact that effective prevention policies must pass through a network of different stakeholders who do not shy away from addressing the political-ideological interpretation of religion, and from advancing a different narrative. Engaging with this religious component will be crucial both against extremism, and in order to build a more integrated society of mutual tolerance.