

Thoughts from a Conference on Violent Extremism

I had the opportunity to attend a conference on the topic of "Violent Extremism in the Balkans" in Belgrade last week. The conference was the latest in a series supported by the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, in partnership with the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP)

The title of the conference was certainly provocative, and reflected the growing concerns about extremism and violent extremism. I went to the conference interested in both the "push" and "pull" factors of extremist recruitment and engagement, with a special interest on education issues in light of my own recent study on that subject. While the ISIS phenomenon and fears of the export of jihadist extremists certainly were in the minds of many, it was evident that participants made an effort to ensure that the discussion did not overtly focus on Islamist inspired terrorism and violence. Formal policy recommendations from the conference will be published within a few weeks. However, I wanted to share some of my own thoughts while they are still fresh in my mind. Some of these relate to the topics that were discussed, while others reflect issues that were uncomfortably avoided.

Organizational Management

First, the majority of participants seemed focused on the role of socio-economic issues as a "push" factor that could potentially drive individuals to participate in extremist movements and commit violence in the name of that movement. When it was pointed out that there have been numerous cases of individuals coming from wealthy societies (e.g. Sweden), the economic aspect was then framed in terms of relative deprivation, or frustrated aspirations. However, I don't recall any specific studies mentioned that formalized this link. Why is it that more global slum-dwellers - among the poorest of the poor - aren't gravitating to extremist movements?? What is it that separates the poor from the poor in making such choices? It is clear that more study is needed, and that even if economic factors do play a role, further study will be needed to identify other causal factors. Second, education was a

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hot topic. The participants discussed the need for better primary, secondary and higher education in the region; the need to give more space for critical thinking; and the need to provide counter-narratives in current affairs and history. The varying roles of formal and non-formal educational efforts were also examined. There appeared to be consensus that better education is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to counter extremist outreach and recruitment, and that politics often gets in the way of common-sense education reform in many countries. Third, the role of civil society in the prevention and fight against violent extremism was also a major topic of discussion, and it went in two main directions. One focused on the role of moderate religious leaders, and how to engage them more effectively to convey counter-narratives to populations and specific individuals at risk. The other was prompted by an interesting presentation on the success ISIS has had in its own outreach, and its stunningly successful use of social media among other mobilizing tools. The presentation did not offer new data, but did take the conversation in an interesting direction.

I remarked that as an organization ISIS has succeeded in implementing nearly every "best practice" in the book in terms of organizational management. Reprehensible as

its goals are, it could "tick the boxes" of many a project logframe: gender/women's outreach; youth-focused engagement; multi-lingual platforms; social media outreach; use of video and info graphics; one-on-one member recruitment methods; and regionally-specific strategies, to name a few. In fact, its productivity and innovation makes one wonder why "democratic" civil society organizations have been unable to mobilize as effectively. Is this a reflection of simple strong mastery of these tactics among ISIS members? Or is it perhaps something much more fundamental: do such tactics succeed because the organization a) knows precisely what it wants, and b) is dedicated to working 24/7 to make it happen? Can moderates ever want something as much as extremists, and can they work as hard to promote such a single-minded vision in order to be heard? Or does the nature of moderation make such zealotry impossible? There were no answers to this frustrating conundrum.

More Questions than Answers

Lastly, and on a related note, I thought it was curious that the issue of ideology was not deeply or substantially addressed. One presentation explored far-right parties in Europe; others considered religious roots or factors.... but the specific matter of what makes an ideology saleable to a group of people to the extent that they will kill or be killed for it was given summary treatment.

As might be expected from a conference, there were more questions than answers, agreement was reached that such a complex social phenomenon requires multi-layered prevention and response options, and it was concluded that more research and policy development is needed. I suspect there will be more similarly-themed events moving forward, and my hope is that these complex and multi-faceted questions can start to be more deeply discussed and debated.