Title

Mapping the Discourse of Violent Extremism in the United Arab Emirates

Introduction

Two-thirds of all countries around the world have experienced a terrorist attack since 2016.¹ The United Nations Security Council affirms that “terrorism in all forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security” and recognizes that terrorism “will not be defeated by military force, law enforcement measures, and intelligence operations alone,” emphasizing the need to address the conditions conducive to its spread.² This recognition that preventative measures are equally integral to fighting terrorism has led to an influx of time and money spent on efforts to address the conditions that are thought to lead an individual to “radicalization” in countries across the globe.³ These policies to prevent or counter violent extremism, under the larger field of counterterrorism, have diverged from traditional security measures, incorporating strategies from the fields of education, peace-building, psychology, poverty alleviation and the like.

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), currently emerging as the regional leader in countering violent extremism (CVE), policies have likewise expanded beyond traditional security measures. Under the purview of counterterrorism policy, UAE has launched numerous initiatives to counter and prevent violent extremism since 2011.⁴ Policies have included the creation of a Ministry of Tolerance, which promotes and monitors messages of tolerance and moderation in religious sermons, through public service campaigns and in education curricula. A Fatwa Council for issuing Islamic rulings was also established. Two laws have been passed in recent years, one criminalizing hatred and discrimination, and another imposing harsh sentences on any individual who supports or joins one of UAE’s 83 designated terrorist organizations. Additionally, the Hedayah Center, a global research center dedicated to understanding and countering violent extremism, was launched, as well as the Sawab Center, aimed at countering extremist narratives.

The UAE appears to be following a global trend of adopting policies that both compliment and diverge from traditional counterterrorism security approaches,⁵ embracing and expanding on more preventative approaches. These UAE initiatives, however, particularly with their focus on tolerance and religious discourse, stand out in their contextual specificity. This research project seeks to

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⁴ Embassy of the UAE. “UAE Counterterrorism.” Counterterrorism | UAE Embassy in Washington, DC.
⁵ For example, see the numerous national strategies on countering violent extremism that have emerged in recent years, such as in Belgium, Lebanon, Macedonia, Slovakia, Jordan and Latvia.
understand the specific socio-political context and understanding of violent extremism that informs the UAE’s policy choices.

**Defining and Understanding Violent Extremism: Current issues**

The field of CVE has been critiqued for both its lack of clear definitions on violent extremism and its lack of evidence-based knowledge that informs current policy options. The United Nations, in their 2015 “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism” seeks to define violent extremism as “a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition. It is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality or system of belief.” In policy, definitional ambiguities open the possibility of issues with politicization, perspective, morality, and a mutable relationship to different forms of violence. While definitional ambiguities allow counterterrorism and countering violent extremism policies to vary drastically from one context to the next, Christopher Baker-Beall proposes that “counterterrorism responses are only made possible through a process of social construction,” where “both the public policy response to the threat of terrorism and the language that constructs terrorism as a threat are understood to be intimately linked.” Roxanne Doty describes how all policymakers necessarily function within what she calls a discursive space “that imposes meaning on [the] world and thus creates reality.” Operationally, discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary approach directed at the “deconstruction of the whole sociopolitical and historical contexts in which discourses are embedded.” Thus, a discourse analysis of policies related to terrorism seeks to uncover how a particular “reality” is produced and maintained in its specific context, and how various policies or practices become possible or even commonsense through this discursive production of this reality.

Previous research on terrorism and counterterrorism discourse has mainly focused on policy emanating from the West. Notably studies include Richard Jackson’s (2005) discourse analysis of US counterterrorism policies post-9/11 which illustrates how 9/11 attacks were discursively constructed as an exceptional tragedy, and an act of war rather than a mass murder or criminal offense. Further, he points out how the attacks were discursively linked to other narratives of threat against the US, such as the attack at Pearl Harbor, which contributed to the conceptualization of terrorism in binary terms of civilization/barbarism. Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass (1996) use a discourse analysis of media to trace the discursive construction of terrorism as a concept. They note that political violence, such as events in Northern Ireland, was retrospectively labeled as terrorism by the media following the shift in discourse that occurred in the 1970s. Moving beyond the West, another notable study by Karmen Erjavec and Zala Volcic (2007) displays how global

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8 Bartolucci, Valentina, and Giorgio Gallo. 2015. Terrorism, system thinking and critical discourse analysis. P.16
9 Ibid, p.33
10 Ibid
12 Ibid
discourse originating in the West is reconceptualized to legitimate violence against Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. Drawing analogies between certain concepts from the global “war on terror,” the authors argue, social actors in Bosnia and Kosovo constructed Muslims as terrorist threats. To the best of my knowledge, no studies have been done on policy discourse emanating from the Arab region, nor have studies been done which focus on “violent extremism” following the semantic shift from “terrorism” discourse.

**Research Questions**

This project builds on the assumption that violent extremism as a concept—one which changes significantly by context—is mediated and constructed by language, which can be analyzed in discourse. Thus, the first question guiding the research is: Through an analysis of policy discourse, what can we learn about the sociopolitical context of the UAE’s counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism policies?

Finally, through mapping discourse emanating from the UAE on violent extremism, this research will ask; What are the “basic discourses” or salient themes guiding the UAE’s understanding of violent extremism? Through this and the previous questions, this project will seek to answer; How do countering violent extremism policies in the UAE construct the policy problem of extremism?

**Methodology**

My research aims to investigate the ontological conceptual framework of violent extremism as it is understood in the UAE. Understanding that policy problems are discursively constructed, a study of language through policy texts and their interrelated discourse is an excellent method to understand the social constructions at play in UAE counterterrorism activities.

Thus, this research will analyze discourse (policies, statements, conference materials, and interviews) as discourse scholars in the Critical Terrorism Studies tradition argue that while discourse is constituted through individual texts, “these texts converge around common themes, around certain constructions of identity and sets of policies considered viable, desirable or necessary.” Employing a grounded theory approach, salient themes (or “basic discourses”) will be mapped through the delineated body of discourse. These basic discourses outline the “main structural positions within a debate,” and “indicate how different others and selves are articulated.” These “basic discourses” provide structure and meaning within a policy text, thereby serving as a unit of analysis through which different policies and positions can be assessed.

Interviews are important to the research as they provide a greater context to understand how language is employed to create meaning for those working in, researching, and implementing CVE

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policies in the UAE. Interviews will include officials from: Hedayah, a “think and do” tank focused on understanding and preventing violent extremism; Sawab Center (aimed at countering extremism messaging, primarily from ISIL and its affiliates; the UAE’s National Tolerance Program, The National, Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, and the government, if possible. Introductions will be provided by the thesis advisor, Dr. Hiba Khodr.

**Significance**

By engaging critically with the emerging discourse on violent extremism, this research will contribute to the field of Critical Terrorism Studies in the region. While the fields of terrorism studies, security studies, and now Critical Terrorism Studies are not lacking in research by any means, this project is responding to the emerging trends of new policies that span well beyond traditional counterterrorism measures, while also directing its focus away from dominant centers of discourse production in the West. As previously mentioned, there has not yet been research that analyzes government policy on terrorism or extremism in a Middle Eastern country. As the UAE positions itself as a regional leader in counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism, this project will provide insight on the contextually-specific dynamics of extremism in the UAE, with possible implications for other countries in the Gulf region as well. The research may also inform future studies comparing UAE or regional discourse on violent extremism against the dominant, Western-centric discourses.

**How the Nadim Makdisi grant will be useful in supporting my research**

This grant will enable the completion of the fieldwork critical to my thesis research by funding travel to UAE to conduct interviews with individuals and organizations working in the field of CVE. Fieldwork will include 10 interviews with researchers, experts, community leaders, and other practitioners working with CVE in/from UAE (with Dubai and Abu Dhabi as the home to the target research and policy centers). As a self-funded graduate student, dependent on loans and fellowship funds, the Makdisi grant would allow for travel that will otherwise be unaffordable and impractical to conduct over the internet. With the ability to travel and conduct fieldwork, the research will be able to more confidently provide insights on how violent extremism is understood in the context of the UAE.

**Timeline**

The background research will be started immediately, with interviews taking place in late summer. The thesis is to be defended in Fall of 2019, with all related activities concluded by the end of 2019.
**Funds Requested and Rationale**

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Nadim Makdisi Memorial Fund Research Grant Proposal
Brianna Lee Ryan
MA Candidate, Public Policy & International Affairs
American University of Beirut
25 February 2019

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Statement of Eligibility

I confirm that I am an active graduate student at AUB, and this grant proposal is dedicated to my research for my master’s thesis as a partial requirement in fulfillment of the Public Policy and International Affairs MA. I am currently seeking IRB approval for my fieldwork.

Please see attached documents for advisor approval.