CeMIS

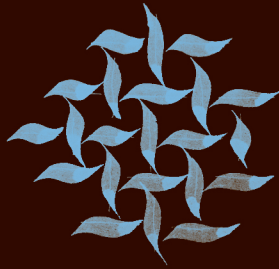## MIGRATION AND INTERCULTURAL STUDIES

RADICALISATION

A Marginal Phenomenon or a Mirror to Society?

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Preface

Rik Coolsaet

A decade and a half after the introduction of the concept of radicalisation in the toolkit of counterterrorism, radicalisation remains as fraught with conceptual confusion and divergent policy prescripts as at the beginning. The same questions as in 2004 are still being raised today. What exactly do we understand by radicalisation ? What are its key drivers ? How to articulate the link between radical thought and radical action and how does religion relate to it ? Repeatedly, international and regional organisations nowadays insist that still more research is needed into the drivers and factors conducive to radicalisation and violent extremism.

The Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies at the University of Antwerp (CeMIS) took the timely initiative at the end of 2016 to attempt at providing an assessment of the state of play in this novel academic and policy domain. Astutely, the Centre brought together young and established academics with practitioners. The heading of the conference reflect the bandwidth in the usage of the concept of radicalisation and the lack of consensus on its very essence: "Radicalisation: a marginal phenomenon, or a mirror to society?"

This publication brings together the contributions and discussions at the 2016 conference. It addresses head-on some of the vexingly tough issues in the realm of (de)radicalisation studies and policies that have bedeviled academics and practitioners alike since European officials embraced the concept of radicalisation, somewhere between May and October 2004. By promoting this concept, they intended to address the preconditions and key drivers, or "root

causes" as they were then labeled, of jihadist terrorism, that shook the world on 9/11 and Europe specifically in March 2004 in the Atocha train station of Madrid. Unlike the perpetrators of 9/11, these attackers did not come from abroad, but were individuals who grew up in Europe and were often born there. How did they come to resort to terrorism and turn against their own countrymen? Why were they attracted by extremist ideologies? What made them vulnerable to recruiters? Something, it was then argued, must turn a person from a "normal" individual into a terrorist. Untangling this black box became the essence of radicalisation studies and the holy grail of European (and later worldwide) counterterrorism efforts.

By embarking on a root causes approach, the EU entered uncharted territory. Historically, Member States had always considered terrorism to be a crime that should be tackled through criminal law. "Root causes" however brought the EU into the realm of prevention. It pushed counterterrorism far beyond its traditional security-centred tools of policing, intelligence and law enforcement by conflating prevention and security with the ultimate ambition of draining the breeding ground for terrorism. Counterterrorism thus became a whole-of-government policy, encompassing complex societal issues such as integration, multiculturalism and social cohesion, and stitching it all together in a broadened security agenda.

Only with the passing of time would the implications of blurring the once obvious dividing line between prevention and security, and their respective constituencies, become clear. It led to ambiguities and unintended consequences that still bedevil counterterrorism, prevention and community relations alike.

A decade and a half later we are nowhere near a satisfying model to explain the black box. Radicalisation is commonly assumed to be a predictor of violent extremism. But there seems to be no single reason for nor a single trajectory into terrorism. Radicalisation is a murky process, just as the European officials who pushed the concept to centre stage in EU counterterrorism thinking and policies, originally diagnosed. The European Commission's original Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation has also insisted in its 2008 Report upon the need to avoid sweeping generalisations, since "individuals involved in terrorist activities exhibit a diversity of social backgrounds, undergo rather different processes of violent radicalisation and are influenced by various combinations of motivations".

In those early days, European officials and the Expert Group warned against the ambiguity of the concept and its potential manipulation. They saw a worrisome tendency to apply radicalisation solely to Islam and to diasporic communities

originating from Muslim-majority countries. Remarkable similarities, so they argued to the contrary, exist between radicalisation to current Islamist or jihadist terrorism and radicalisation associated with left-wing, right-wing or ethno-nationalist terrorism in Western Europe since the 1960s.

In 2004, the head of Scotland Yard's counterterrorism command, Peter Clarke, was probably among the first officials to warn the media against labelling today's main terrorist threat as "Islamic", since this was both offensive and misleading. But this is exactly what happened.

The central position the concept of radicalisation acquired in policy, law enforcement and academia as the holy grail of counterterrorism contributed significantly to the shift in focus from context to individual, as one of the contributions in this book has spelled out. Radicalisation came to be seen as a unique and contemporary process linked almost exclusively to Muslim-related phenomena – exactly what the European officials had hoped to avoid.

In media and official discourse – but also in deradicalisation programmes – radicalisation lost its inherent complexity. A "radical" – when in fact a "literalist" is meant – reading of the Quran and the hadîth was subsequently seen as the vestibule of jihadism, Islam as implicitly related with terrorism, and Muslim minorities as a suspected "Other".

Another contribution in this books points to the same direction, when concluding that religion plays a far lesser role in sliding into violent extremism and terrorism than the policy responses and media reporting often assume. This applies in particular to the ISIS generation, as Europol too concluded in its 2016 assessment of the string of recent terrorist attacks in Europe: "In view of this shift away from the religious component in the radicalisation of, especially, young recruits, it may be more accurate to speak of a 'violent extremist social trend' rather than using the term 'radicalisation.'"

Notwithstanding the accumulated academic research and practitioners' experiences from the past decade and a half pointing to the contrary, the focus on ideology and ideas as the key driver of radicalisation continues to retain a strong backing in policy and media reporting. This approach suggests that the war on ideas is the key vector in addressing radicalisation, through the promotion of a so-called "moderate Islam" in order to combat the negative influence of "radical Islam". An extreme point of view within this school goes as far as claiming that Islam itself constitutes the core problem. According to this interpretation, Islam is not compatible with Western norms and values. Consequently, the world is said to face a global revolution, threatening free nations, as was the case with

Nazism and Communism. Jihadist attacks are but the visible marks of this civilisational clash.

Privileging ideology over context means that all the blame can be offloaded onto the "radical" individual and his (or her) ideas, so that the instigating circumstances that are inherently part of the social environment and context in which that individual lives are downplayed. Accordingly, the share society has in the creation of these breeding grounds for radicalism can be dismissed.

Many first-line prevention workers however have discovered that theological or ideological discussions are indeed mostly pointless in their dealing with "radicalised" individuals or returnees. This reflects the opposite end in the spectrum of analyses of radicalisation. According to this approach, radicalisation originates in everyday life. The crucial question is then to identify what social, economic, cultural and political conditions explain the appeal of violent extremism.

Recently, radicalisation studies even went to a more granular level, emphasizing the need to look at highly specific local conditions that can explain the wide variety of radicalisation cases within any given state. In order to be more effective, policies have to take into account the unique local characteristics to develop tailor-made interventions that address radicalisation where it arises.

Radicalisation remains conceptually as mired in ambiguity as the much older notion of terrorism itself. It is often being used as a catch-all phrase. Many different expressions of an individual's ideas and behaviour are mixed together as "signs of radicalisation", and these range from the increased presence of girls and women wearing the hijab, men dressed in Salafi trousers, orthodox preachers, radical ideas, and the terrorist acts themselves. Putting these disparate signs together into a box labelled "indicators of radicalisation" not only empties the word of all explanatory meaning, but it also fails to explain the crucial mutation from radical ideas to radical action.

This publication calls for nuance instead of sweeping generalisations. All too often these lead to unsubstantiated policy recommendations with occasionally unwarranted consequences. Aspiring to move beyond hypes and testing superficial assumptions is probably the best way to describe the ambitions of the conveners of the 2016 CeMIS conference and the common denominator between the contributors to this publication. This kind of intellectual endeavor is crucial in order to identify adequate remedies that can prevent new generations to fall under the spell of future forms of violent extremism.