CONFERENCE REPORT

The Threat of Far-right Extremism: War on Terror 2.0?

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This is a report on a public session titled
The Threat of Far-right Extremism: War on Terror 2.0?",
held as part of the TRT World Forum 2019. The views, themes and
discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of
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Speakers

Šefik Džaferović

Bosniak Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina

President Šefik Džaferović was elected to a four-year term as a Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina on October 7, 2018. Prior to his election to the Presidency, he served four terms as a Representative in the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2002-2018) and was the Chairman/Vice-Chairman of the House from 2014 to 2018. He has held a number of important positions in the Party of Democratic Action and is currently its Vice-President. From 1986 to 1992, he served as a higher court judge and as a municipal court judge from 1979 to 1986. President Džaferović graduated from the Faculty of Law at the University of Sarajevo in 1979.

Richard Balfe

Member of House of Lords, UK

Richard Balfe is a Member of the British House of Lords, the UK's upper chamber of Parliament. From 1979 to 2004, he served as a Member of the European Parliament. During his tenure, Lord Balfe was responsible for the report that led to the formal re-establishment of relations between the European and Turkish Parliaments in 1985. Additionally, he served as a member of the Joint EU-Turkey Parliamentary Committee from 1985 to 2004. Lord Balfe is currently a Member of the Council of Europe.

Haroon Siddiqui

Editorial Page Editor Emeritus of the Toronto Star

Haroon Siddiqui is Editorial Page Editor Emeritus at the Toronto Star, a senior Fellow at Massey College, University of Toronto and Distinguished Visiting Professor at Ryerson University. He has covered Canadian affairs for 50 years and reported from over 50 countries. He is author of 'Being Muslim', a bestseller, based on his travels through Europe, the Middle East, South Asia and the Far East and is a recipient of the Order of Canada, the nation's highest civilian honour.

Talip Küçükcan

Professor of Sociology at Marmara University and Senior Fellow at the TRT World Research Centre

Talip Küçükcan is a Professor of Sociology at Marmara University in Istanbul and a former member of the Turkish Parliament (2015-2018). Küçükcan is the former Head of the Turkish Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe and a Member of Foreign Relations Committee. He was among the founding team of the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) and its former Director of Foreign Policy Research. Küçükcan is specialised in foreign relations with a focus on Middle Eastern affairs, Turkey-EU relations, transnational migration, freedom of religion, and Muslim minorities in Europe. He is a regular commentator on national and international media.

Shadi Hamid

Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution

Dr Shadi Hamid is a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and a contributing writer at The Atlantic. He is the author of 'Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World', and co-editor of 'Rethinking Political Islam'. His first book, 'Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East', was named a Foreign Affairs Best Book of 2014. Hamid was named one of the world's top 50 thinkers of 2019 by Prospect magazine. He received his B.S. and M.A. from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and his Ph.D. in political science from Oxford University.

Megan Squire

Professor of Computing Sciences at Elon University

Dr Megan Squire is a professor of Computer Science at Elon University (North Carolina, USA). Her main research area is applying data science techniques to understand niche and extremist online communities, particularly network, image, and text analysis of radical right-wing groups on social media. Dr. Squire is the author of two books on data cleaning and data mining, and over thirty five peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, including several Best Paper awards. In 2017, she was named the Elon University Distinguished Scholar, and in 2018 she was named a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right.

Summary

The panel 'the Threat of Far-Right Extremism' discussed the divergent understandings of terrorism, the reasons behind the rise of far-right, the role of social media, the challenges that come with it and how to tackle these problems.

Bosniak member of the Bosnian Presidency Šefik Džaferović stated that extremism and terrorism can be overcome through solidarity and cooperation. In this regard, he pointed out that no terrorist should be related to any religion and ethnicity. He also argued that the idea that different cultures and civilizations can co-exist together in peace should be promoted as a response to extremism and focused on the Bosnian experience as an example.

Haroon Siddiqui stressed the need to hold social media platforms responsible with regards to the spread of extremist voices. According to him while states should be passing rules and regulations, these outlets should be partners in creating a solution to this problem.

Lord Richard Balfe emphasized the importance of not associating any religion with terrorist acts. He also stated that terrorism is not a new phenomenon, but today terrorists can link with each other easily due to changes in communication and this situation poses new threats that require new responses.

Talip Küçükcan argued that there is a selective reading concerning the issue of terrorism and incidents related to far-right extremism are not tackled adequately. Moreover, he said far-right populist parties are capitalising on people's grievances to justify and legitimise their anti-pluralist, anti-universalist, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim actions.

On the other hand, Shadi Hamid stated that despite their very problematic views, right-wing populist parties have the right to express themselves as long as they are not inciting violence. He commented that a clear distinction between far-right parties and extremists needs to be made. He further added that, rather than focusing on problematizing right-wing populist parties, the reasons behind their rise need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Focusing on social media and violent extremism, Meghan Squire said that due to technological developments propaganda spreads faster and more effectively today. She stated that these changes in online radicalisation result in the need for finding new ways to fight these problems.

Report
Extremism: Need for Solidarity And Cooperation

In his keynote address, Bosniak Member of the Bosnian Presidency Šefik Džaferović focused on the issue of extremism and terrorism. He stated that today, geographical distances are meaningless with new technology and social media enabling communication to be faster than ever. However, he argued that despite the benefits, these advances in technology have brought the risk that historical crimes such as those that took place in Bosnia would be taken as a source of inspiration for attacks such as those in Norway or New Zealand.

He also emphasized that terrorism should not be attached to any culture, religion or race, as this approach feeds into their goal of creating divisions. He added that extremists exploit religion, nationality and other concepts to pursue their aims. According to Džaferović, the political response to extremism should be spreading the idea that different religions, cultures, ethnicities and civilisations can co-exist in peace. Thereby, he also called for the establishment of solidarity and cooperation between different countries. He said that the world can draw lessons from the Bosnian example, which had shown that co-existence is possible, and differences are contributions to the cultural richness.

A Misconstrued Understanding of Terrorism

One of the highlights of the discussion was the need to redefine the notion of terrorism. In this regard, there was agreement among the panellists that the 9/11 terror attacks were a turning point in how terrorism has been perceived. Talip Küçükcan stated that after 9/11 there has been a strong emphasis on religion in general and Muslims in particular in political discourse, publications and research.

Haroon Siddiqui argued that after that terror attack, all Muslims began to be deemed as terrorists. According to Siddiqui, this narrative that took hold in the United States also expanded to Europe. Küçükcan said because of this point of view, the war on terror effectively became tantamount to a war on Islam and

Muslims. He added that this approach was also used to legitimise invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. He pointed out that despite the fact that the majority of the Muslims condemn terrorist attacks, they are still associated with these incidents.

As a supplementary statement, Lord Richard Balfe said that no religion should be linked with terrorist acts. In addition to these criticisms, Küçükcan also expressed the need to redefine the concept and understanding of terrorism since far-right extremism and violence is neglected in the discussion. He said that this issue needs to be taken into serious consideration as there is an increase in the violent acts being perpetrated by right-wing extremists.

Rise of Far-right: The Problem or the Symptom?

Far-right populist parties were another key point in the session debate. Küçükcan stated that these parties share several problematic views- they are all anti-immigrant, anti-pluralist, anti-universalist, anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim. On the other hand, despite agreeing with Küçükcan, Shadi Hamid argued that these parties have representation, they are part of political processes and have seats in parliaments. Hamid argued that a clear distinction needs to be made

between extremists who use violence, such as in the case of Christchurch shootings, and far-right political parties such as the AFD in Germany or the National Front in France. In this regard, he suggested that we have to be careful not to demonise ideas regardless of how reprehensible these can be as long as they are not inciting violence.

Disagreeing with Hamid, Küçükcan stated that these parties should not be given legitimacy. Pointing out the rise in attacks on Muslims, Jews and other minorities in the West, Küçükcan argued that populist parties should bear a significant degree of responsibility for the current situation. However, drawing attention to an important point, Hamid questioned whether these parties should be seen as the actual problem or whether they should be analysed as the symptom arising out of deep structural issues. He stated that the rise of right-wing populists is a worldwide phenomenon and this should be perceived as a sign for the need to address the grievances that people have. Giving Trump's supporters as an example, he argued that even though some of these people can be racist, we cannot ignore and dismiss their legitimate grievances.

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Freedom of Speech: Where to Draw a Line?

Freedom of speech was a contested topic during the panel session. Siddiqui pointed out that this has been an ongoing debate in liberal democracies. While supporting the free expression of ideas, he said this absolutism works only in theory. He continued by stating that with every argument, a countervailing argument needs to be presented, however, because this is missing, right-wing voices are dominating the discussion on social media. Based on this reasoning, Siddiqui stressed that a line needs to be drawn on what could be considered as free speech and what could be regarded as hate speech. He argued that words can be dangerous and drew on the example of the Rwandan genocide and the role played by radio stations in fomenting violence.

On the other hand, Hamid, expressing his concerns about the issue, argued that if the notion of drawing a line is accepted, it means that a certain group, party or state authority would be given the power to decide what could be considered acceptable. He said this would lead to problems when the designated authority makes distinctions that we do not agree with. He claimed that there can be foundational differences over important issues within society, but everyone has to learn to live with each other. In this regard, he gave immigration in the United States as an example and stated that there are people who are anti-immigrant and who want lower levels of immigration, however, he suggested that not all of these people should not be labelled as racists. He further argued that as we cannot force people to be tolerant, and, as much as we may disagree with them, they are entitled to their opinion in a democratic setting.

Challenge of Social Media

Talking about extremism and the challenges related to it, there has been a strong emphasis on the role of social media. Siddiqui said that before when there was a radical voice somewhere it was contained in the area where it emerged. Today, with billions of users of social media outlets, extremists can broadcast their ideas worldwide. He further argued that because of this reason, terrorists relate to and echo each other.

Meghan Squire stated that building data sets in this regard is important in both analysing and detecting patterns to understand the crossover between extremist groups. While she also stressed that now propaganda spreads much faster and efficiently, she argued that the current challenge is how to track this process and watch players move from one system to the other. She pointed to encryption, uncensored blur and removable content as being the main issues in this regard.

On the other hand, Siddiqui claimed that social media outlets also need to bear responsibility, they need to ensure control and develop regulatory processes for the content that is being generated on their plat-forms. He also argued that states should impose rules and regulations on these companies. Squire, however, stated that legal frameworks and traditional policies may not be enough in tackling this problem. New ways need to be introduced and more research needs to be done to properly deal with online extremism.

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Key Takeaways

- No single religion, race, culture or civilization should be associated with terrorism.

- The concept and understanding of terrorism needs to be redefined as far-right extremism and violence related to it has been largely neglected.

- The reasons behind the rise of far-right political parties and the grievances expressed by some of their supporters need to be acknowledged in order to properly understand and address the phenomenon.

- Freedom of speech remains a contested topic, while people should be entitled to their opinions in a democratic setting, hate speech should be more adequately addressed.

- Technological developments and social media have enabled extremist propaganda to spread more quickly and efficiently.

- Social media outlets should bear responsibility for tackling online extremism while states should also ensure legal frameworks and new policies are in place to properly deal with these challenges