Countering Violent Extremism in Iraq:

Key Public Discourses from the Government, Media
and Academia Perspectives

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the key public discourses on violent extremism in Iraq and how it is perceived by the government, academia and media. Centre for Political and Strategic Studies conducted many interviews on violent extremism with different stake-holders and people from different backgrounds during (April 2017 - October 2017). In addition to that, the Centre has sent a letter to many government institutions in the Kurdistan Region and the Iraqi Government, asking them (1) whether they are instructed or informed about any approach of counter violent extremism, (2) the position of human security in their approach of preventing and countering violent extremism, (3) how they perceive violent extremism; its root causes and how should be countered. One of the findings is that when it comes to government there is no policy or approach that addresses violent extremism in a comprehensive and multi-sector way. To a large extent, the main focus is still based on stabilization and stabilization in itself is understood from hard security, military and short term objectives.

Introduction

The rise of ISIS and other extremist groups have posed existential security threats to the very existence of Iraq. Violent extremism in Iraq, which is ideologically driven and rejects all the existing institutions and structures, has questioned the state capacity and
monopoly over violence and has seriously damaged state-society relations. Despite the threat posed by violent extremists in various forms, since 2003 violent extremism has been mainly treated from hard security and top-down approach. Violent extremism has benefited from armed conflict, religion and sectarian war, regional interference, instability in the country and weakness of the Federal government. These have been emphasised by different stake-holders in our workshop, which conducted on 18th of September 2017 by Centre for Political and Strategic Studies.

1. Violent extremism from the perspective of the academia

One of the key topics within the academia is the focus on history, complexities and multi-layered nature of violence and extremism in Iraq. Extremism is studied from different layers and dimensions. However, it has not been translated into policy area or has little impact on the policy process.

From the academic perspectives, when there is a state of chaos, lack of control as well as a clear strategy of national security, the violent nature of humans embolden themselves in violent and aggressive ways. This has been the case for encouraging extremism for many decades. In Iraq, violence is directly linked to political power directly or even indirectly. It has been used to gain power or to defend power by different groups. Violence is shaped by the purpose of political power or authority. Different groups including Islamist groups and opposition movements have sought violence to the level of extremism to achieve a certain goal that could not be accomplished without violence. Violence is “a mean which is used by a privileged side in suspended situations, or to defend a certain goal which is related to the existence of those who seek it, to achieve a better outcome as they have failed to achieve it through peaceful ways”1.

In Iraq, violent extremism is also justified to defend the rights and security of a specific group against other groups in the same society. Violent extremism benefits from social grievances or the demands of a specific group which have not been met. It also manifest itself in the struggle of the oppressed against internal or external ‘occupying’ forces. Due to the structural fragmentation of the Iraqi society state is still not seen as legitimate in

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1An interview with Prof. Raad Abdul Jalil. He is one of announced Iraqi professors in the College of Political Science/Baghdad University, Working on violence, political Islam and terrorism since 1980s. He born in 1946 in Baghdad and studied his MA. and PH.D. from the University of Baghdad. Pro. Abdul Jalelhas been working at the Department of Political Sciences/ Salahaddin University- Erbil since 2006.
the eyes of the people. For this reason, the word ‘occupying’ is sometimes used to refer
the action of the Iraqi state and to be perceived as act of occupying in the eyes of a
group or groups in Iraq. The academic studies have focused on the notion of
‘s submission’. Violent extremists describe their marginalization as ‘subordination’ to
enemy, thus violence is seen as a necessity to confront this state of being a subordinate.
In Iraq, this feeling or fear of being a subordinate exists in intra-communal relations and
within a specific community. In this context, terrorism is defined as a political violence
committed by a group and this stance might be considered as a terrorist activity by
another group. While terrorism has clear characteristics, but also related to the way a
group is defined by others. The perception and the political labelling is an important
discourse, which can be found in the academia².

1.1. Focal issues among the academia

There are some issues that have been focused by the media, academic and government
perspectives, but with different meanings and purposes, for example state fragility, the
politics of exclusion, and the absence of national reconciliation. Identity politics is
highlighted by many studies and media reports, but the media has narrowly focused on
sectarian sides of the identity division, in another word the Shiite -Sunni conflict, while
the academia has broadly studied the identity politics and focused on different identity
divisions. The Arabs as the main component of Iraq are themselves split between Sunni
and Shiite sects of Islam. Intra-Iraqi politics and violence has mainly been fought along
different cleavages, but Shia/Sunni conflict has generated the large-scale violence in
Iraq. The 2003 United States-led invasion, regime change, and subsequent occupation
exacerbate these tensions. Since then, the violence in the country has been justified and
legitimized by religious sectarian narratives that dehumanized the sectarian “other,”
marginalized other groups, and transformed the nature of sectarian relations into a
zero-sum conflict. Within less or more than two years after the 2003 Iraqi invasion, the
sectarian war was not only a product of the new events in post-2033 war, but has
become institutionalized and the nature of the politics of the New Iraq after 2003.

Sectarianism is another key overlapping issue that has become an integral part of the
public discourse. It is considered to be one of the main drivers of violent extremism in

² See: the first publication of Strategic and Political Studies Journal, (1), in 2015, which covers different aspects
of terrorism from the perspective of Kurdistan Universities.
Iraq, also it’s an outcome of poor governance\textsuperscript{3}, and has a lot to do with the government’s inability to provide basic services\textsuperscript{4}, and meet the demands of people.

Due to internal instability and conflict, the government has lost its control over more than (1/3) of his territory especially during (2014 - 2017); it also does not have the tools necessary to address many of the grievances driving violent extremism in recent years. Different armed groups filled the vacuum, and now they claim that they are able to focus of his ion as a state, they claim that they are the only one who can provide security to people in a specific area, and they have established different links to control people’s demands and grievances. It is hard to imagine that any society could have withstood the dissolving of its security forces and institutions, let alone a society that had lived under decades of abusive authoritarian rule. In many areas, the lawlessness or none- practicing law above the all, led to communities forming their own ‘self-defence’ units for protection. It created a self-help- situation. Political parties and powers were mostly associated with or belonging to a specific ethnic or religious group; most of them are not secular, viewing at secularism as “dangerous ideology” which threats Islam and their political powers as well. So that, we can say that the Iraqi political stage lack to non-sectarian political party as a whole.

Failure to provide security for people after the collapse of the regime was a big mistake that led directly to the insurgency. In the aftermath of the overthrow of the previous regime in Iraq, continuing insurgency, terrorism, and sectarian conflict slowed plans for democratization and state-building projects and also undermined the legitimacy of the interim occupation organizations and of the fledgling transition authorities. While insurgents remain a threat to Iraq’s long-term peace-building, some of them are still perceived by Iraqis as the ones who are fighting for the country’s sovereignty and dignity.

Another explanation of the rise of violent extremists in Iraq since 2003 is the lacking of genuine national reconciliation. This has caused most nationalist, extremist insurgent groups – whether Sunni or Shiite – to base their struggle on the notion of ‘national


\textsuperscript{4}Kamaran Palani (2015) Social Dimensions of Stabilizing Security in Kurdistan Region (in Kurdish), Strategic and Political Studies Journal, (1), 34-42
resistance’ (muqawamawataniyya) for Iraq, a discourse which retains considerable resonance among the population and could attract many citizens or calling non-citizens back to violence, if they do not see any rapid improvement in their living conditions⁵.

The new Iraqi governments have not been able to fulfil their functions; as a result, the government has lost its legitimacy. State fragility has been the key element driving conflict in Iraq. Many things went wrong in the US initiated Iraqi democratization and state-building, its democracy promotion impaired democratic consolidation of Iraqi government. There is a flaw in the democratic transition phase (democratization) where this stage has not been completed. democratization process created and developed new dynamics that could be responsible for the present violence in the country. For example, the USA-led occupation and reconstruction activities of Iraq were responsible for creating the conditions that led to the bloodiest Civil War between (2005 -2007). The failure to incorporate or integrate Sunni political powers and Sunni population into the political process from 2003 to 2005, also excluding Sunnis from representative politics which caused political isolation, consequently caused to create a very suitable political environment to rise of extremists such as al-Qaeda and subsequent attacks on non-Sunnis (Hill, 2010)⁶.

The Coalition Provisional Authority just a month after the 2003 invasion dissolved the Ba’ath Party, dismissed many of its members from the government, and disbanded the military and other security forces. As a result, a large number of people saw no place for themselves in the new political system. Sunni Arabs took a hostile position, as their rivals, the Shi’ite and the Kurds occupied key positions, both of them made a political alliance until few months ago in order to build Iraqi state. So, the political process during the initial phase was characterized by the dominance of Shiite religious parties and no Sunni integration. The exclusion of former security and military forces (1) gave legal sanction to the paralysis of government that was already under way⁷, (2) leaded to the waves of Sunni protests, and these protest have forced Sunni main parties to pull

out of the Iraqi election in 2005, and (3) resulted in failing to deliver national and individual reconciliation which is necessary for the success of post-war reconstruction.

Alongside the order of dismantling Iraq former security forces, it makes the achievement of peace much harder by increasing and creating new conflicts. A blanket policy of purging the top four ranks of the civil service of Ba'ath party members was excessive and denuded public institutions of experienced managerial personnel and front-line staff, either because of the actual purges or because many disillusioned civil servants remained at home. The policy disabled rather than built the capacity of the state administration.

The practising of de-Ba'athification through trials and truth commissions has further impeded peace-building process in the country. De-Ba'athification along with accusations of terrorism and corruption, have become convenient political tools to discredit and even remove opponents. The main demand of the current waves of anti-government protest movements across majority-Sunni Arab areas is the reform of de-Ba'athification policy which is seen by Sunnis as a tool to decriminalize and oppress them as a cultural component and political power at the same time. The de-Ba'athification not only did not heal past abuses, but it also widens the sectarian decision between Iraqis by the exclusion of many former Sunni leaders\(^8\). Establishing security process without including all stakeholders will only exacerbate the conflict. Additionally, all local actors need to be integrated with security sector reconstruction processes from the outset in order gradually to build local capacity.

Corruption and disappointment towards the authority facilitates the process of mobilizing people against the political authority, but also to distract the state-people relations and the legitimacy of the state institutions. Violent extremists tend to put all people into one category, for example from 2003 to 2014, any one worked for the government, no matter what was the nature of the job; civilian or military jobs, was seen as the supporter of the oppressor (the state), and thus should be killed if they refuse to leave their job. This was a serious problem within both of Sunni and ethnic-mixed communities in the early years after the 2003 invasion.

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1.2. Definition of violent extremism

The academic basically deals with two different definitions of violent extremism; the kind of group ready to use violence to gain certain goals, and the other one is the state or the government uses violence in the name of protecting state security against cultural components and groups of the society. The authority in Iraq has labeled the movements of different Sunni groups as terrorist and violent, because they are not abided by the rule of the authority. These details cannot find in the way media has covered the issue, and can hardly be found from the government or official statements. For this reason, it is important to understand how the topic of violent extremism is defined in different sources.

Different forms of violence have been broadly defined in the academia. Violence can take different forms; including political violence, criminal violence as well as violent extremism. Political violence is defined as various practices and violent activities as coup, protest, stroke and riot, and also revolution, violent revolutionary, war and war of the gangs. All these violent activities and forms have some main common characteristics as the following:

I. It is about a political activity, which means that it aims at making a change in the system and the practices of the government. So that, the violence is justified to make a change.

II. It has no direct personal gains; it is more shaped by the desires of those who form the political group. In most cases, it is more community-based activities than nationwide.

Criminal violence is appeared to be non-political activity which seeks to achieve personal gains. This form of violence basically has no collective goals or not concerned with the well-being or demands of a group. Well, this form is not solely based on personal preferences, but also the enmity towards a specific community and religion in Iraq.

Violent extremism embraces both political and criminal violence in a new form. It is a criminal activity with political objectives and is ready to use force and coercion in an illegitimate way. The aim goes beyond gaining personal interest; it wants to re-establish
political authority and institutions different from the existing one. It is driven by extremist ideological to use all forms of coercion against other societal groups and people who do not believe in their ideology. An example of it will be political terrorism, acts of ethnic cleansing, marginalizing people.

1.3. Factors and drivers of violent extremism

In academic studies, some issues have been highlighted frequently are internal instability and the people’s grievances and dissatisfactions towards the government, the political system due to the lack of sense of justice, also lack of equality and the lack of security in the first place. There are specific issues that cause these complex problems:

1- The absence of social justice and re-distribution of resources

People demonstrate and protest the political system to achieve freedom, dignity and social justice. In Iraq, the unfair distribution of resources has played a key role in creating violent conflicts at both state and society levels.

In Iraq, employment has reached %52, and poverty has reached %39. The latter one, poverty, is a central factor which leading many young citizens about (16-26) years old to involve in Shiite and Sunni militia groups (Al-Hashid). Consequently, that increasing the circle of violent extremism.

2- The dissatisfaction of people

People are completely dissatisfied with the government and state institutions. This dissatisfaction has reached the level of not accepting the state and not viewing its institutions as legitimate entity. This has driven very violent groups in the society and encouraged many people to join different armed and violent groups against the state and other groups of the society. In the case of Iraq, this has damaged the state-people relations to the extent of complete loss of belonging and hope from the government.

2. Violent extremism and the government discourse

What this research finds that is the government has no overall and clear policy on countering violent extremism and human security approach has not been included in the recent attempts made to stabilize the areas retaken from ISIS. This does not mean that the government of Iraq and the government of Kurdistan have not adopted
measures and procedures to counter violent extremism. The Iraqi constitution in some articles addresses the issue of violent extremism to protect societal peace and human security. The article 6 states that “Transfer of authority shall be made peacefully through democratic means as stipulated in this Constitution”. Also the article 7 says that “Any entity or program that adopts, incites, facilitates, glorifies, promotes, or justifies racism or terrorism or accusations of being an infidel (takfir) or ethnic cleansing, especially the Saddamist Ba'ath in Iraq and its symbols, under any name whatsoever, shall be prohibited. Such entities may not be part of political pluralism in Iraq. This shall be regulated by law.

Going back to the Iraqi government an Iraqi parliament polices shows that no policy framework of human security can be found, it is still the classical security dominated mentality of decision making channels in Iraq, for instance during the drafting of budget law in Iraq we sow huge amount of budget provided for military sector and military equipments but less for health and education sector.

Iraq is a federal state according to the Iraqi constitution. The idea of a federal state is rooted in the diversity and the existing of different religious and ethnic groups in Iraq. The success of the Kurdistan Region as a federal entity in providing security and progress towards peace-building and development has encouraged other regions in Iraq to seek the same right.

For a long period of time the areas which then designed as disputed territories in the Iraqi constitution, has been the main sources of violence and home to many radical groups. The Article 140 in the constitution is to solve the status of the dispute over these territories, but the Article has never been implemented. Basically the Iraqi constitution does not provide bottom-up solutions to address the root causes of the conflict in the country; it is more bottom-up and subject to different political interpretations, as it is the case in the conflict over the status of the disputed territories.

The political process in Iraq is moving towards more exclusion and the growing sectarian nature of the new Iraq is very dangerous. To address the conflicts and restoring the state monopoly over violence, the Iraqi government believes that the only way to stabilize the country and counter the threats of violent extremism is centralizing decision-making process and restoring the state monopoly over violence.
The Kurdistan regional government has taken some procedures to counter sectarianism which is one of the causes of violent extremism from the perspective of the KRG. Here are key measures taken by the government to counter violent extremism:

1- The Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs

The ministry has banned all the texts and books that spread hatred and radicalism, mostly the religious books of some famous Saudi salafist scholars. Monitoring the TV programs and giving them some instructions about the content of their programs. The Ministry has decided to remove a number of mosque preachers, because of their support for violence and the promotion of extremism as administrative measures, pointing to the accession of a number of citizens to radical groups, including ISIS, based on the impact of these speeches. The Ministry also sought to regulate the Friday speeches by centralizing the speeches, ordering some instructions about the sensitivity of some topics, interpretations and addressing some sensitive subjects. From the perspective of the ministry these measures are necessary prevent violence and hatred within the society.

2- The Ministry of Youth and Culture

The Ministry has filed a case against some journals that encouraged radical thoughts. The government of Kurdistan has also closed the television channels that support the Salafi/Takfiri ideology within the capacity of the Anti-terrorism Law in Iraq. The Kurdistan Region has passed the anti-terrorism law to take measures against anyone who promotes extremism. This prompted the provincial government to resort to the anti-terrorism law in order to stop broadcasting these ideas.

3- The Ministry of Interior

In order to counter some causes of violence, especially the domestic violence, different committees and mechanisms within police directorates created. These new mechanisms have provided a relative legal empowerment to women to access justice and raising awareness. The laws have been issued or amended to counter violence against women. This can be interpreted as more bottom-up solutions to address social violence comparing to other procedures which more aimed at confronting violent extremism. In 2011, the Kurdistan Parliament passed the Law No. (8) to counter domestic violence in
the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. According to this law, anyone who has a family relationship is prohibited from committing family violence, including physical, sexual and psychological violence within the family.

4. The Ministry of Justice

The Ministry of Justice has announced a new punishment law based on the Iraqi punishment law, to counter the acts of terrorism in Kurdistan.

3. The media perspective regarding violent extremism

How countering violent extremism is perceived and presented by the media, it depends on the context and the background of media outlets in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. It is important to mention that the way media works in Iraq works in the rest of Iraq is quite different from the media in Kurdistan. This is not only the case at more top-down and government levels, but there is also such a difference within the political party or even personal levels. Despite the different backgrounds of media outlets, the main picture of violent extremism does not include broader sectors of it and mainly focus on the drivers of violent extremism from sectarian perspectives and regional interferences especially in the Iraqi media, and in Kurdistan it is more portrayed as the failure of governance in Baghdad.

With sectarian violence in Iraq between Shiaa and Sunii, media also played a negative role of violence incitement, some of international actors tried to provide a capacity building training and skills increasing in regard of peace and security within the media sector to product a nonviolence dictionary and to impact the media sector to have role of peace makers not to be a part of violence incitemen7. Through showing the human security approach and not only focusing on anti terrorism efforts, but also to talk about health, education, economy and political security through sending an awareness raising message to people.

Iraqi media mentions the word ‘religion’ to refer to violent extremisim more than any other words. More specifically, it look at religion in relation to the recent violent extremist groups from the sectarian point of view; mainly between Shia and Sunni, and

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7 The Adda network for Media monitoring, the monitoring of important issues on the Iraqi media from 25 November to 15 December 2012, the project funded by Unites States Institute for Peace.
very recently the conflict between the KRG and the Iraqi government over the independence referendum and territorial disputes has been highlighted as a cause of further extremism in different forms.

Today the media in Iraq divided as the Iraqi politician divided with regional impact on the media agenda in Iraq, we can see many TVs in Iraq regarding fighting terrorism but no media outlet specialized on peace, non violence and human security.

Kurdistan situation is different than Iraq from point of history, the freedom of media in Kurdistan going back to 1991 after the Kurdistan revolution against Iraqi regime, at that time the media perspective on CVE in Kurdistan was showing that Iraqi regime and Saddam Hussein consider a big threat of Kurdistan peace and security as two sanctions imposed on Kurdistan at that time, the international economic sanction on Iraq and Iraqi sanction on Kurdistan, then the media filed develop but still kept between political parties and the role of civil society organization and privet sector was not exist, the big shift was 2003 with increasing the number of the media and some new channels showing human security approach in different ways, again the human security approach was not at that level in Kurdish media coverage, but after ISIS attack of most Kurdish area after Mosul the media in Kurdistan focused mainly on that terrorism fighting, if we are going back to the hours speeding during 24 hours we can see most of the programs as news, reports, debates were on the fighting terrorisms and human security from point of countering violence extremists, and during our review of the policy the Ministry of Coulter and Youth we couldn't find any ministerial policy regarding media and CVE, but they informed us that after 2014 and the ISIS attack of Kurdistan the number of songs and music production increased to support Peshmarga fighting against ISIS and many of short movies produced showing ISIS crimes and Peshmarga victories. Also the ministry reviewed channels that broadcasting any kind of extremism and violence incitement through media, but we noted that in Kurdistan like in Iraq have no coordination between government; sector regarding human security approach and the CVE policy is different from the ministry to the other one.

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10Interview with Mr. Jamal Hussein, media expert and general director Ministry of Youth and Coulter, KRG, Erbil 12th October 2017.
Conclusion

One of the main conclusion is there is the lack of clarity about what approach is taken by the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Region government to counter violent extremism. This confusion exists even among the same government institutions. Different ministries have different definitions and priorities, and these different perceptions have not been put in one single policy. The reason for that is there is comprehensive national policy to counter violent extremism. It is true that a hard security-based approach has dominated the government measures to counter violent extremism, but at the same time some government institutions and ministries have taken some steps which are beyond traditional approach to countering violent extremism; and they have tried to engage with more preventive measures, such as the reforms the Ministry of Education has done in some curricula, or the measures the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs in Iraq and the KRI have taken to use counter-narrative arguments and bring more moderate voices against the interpretations of radical Islamist groups, can be explained as more preventive and long-term approach, but still all these efforts need to be incorporated and integrated into a national policy approach at both bottom-up and top-up levels.