1 Engaging with PIV and PIM in relation to the Arab World

Defining politico-ideological violence and mobilisation

This book engages with a phenomenon that has mostly been referred to as terrorism or violent extremism. Both these notions are heavily politically and emotionally laden and based on implicit and diverging assumptions about who is the enemy, what is legitimate or illegitimate violence, and what can be considered political and what cannot (Stampnitzky, 2017). There is still no consensus on how to define terrorism. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566, adopted unanimously on 8 October 2004, defines terrorism as

> criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, and all other acts which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism.
>
> (United Nations, 2004)

In many ways, violent extremism has simply become a new buzzword to talk about what had hitherto been widely referred to as terrorism. In its *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, the UN General Assembly discusses measures to prevent **violent extremism** but fails, ironically, to define it: 'The present Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism considers and addresses violent extremism as, and when, conducive to terrorism. Violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition' (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Mrs Ni Aoláin, the UN Special Rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights, expresses her concern that 'the definition of 'violent extremism' remains opaque and deeply contested' and 'warns against the use of new terminology that, like terrorism, is overly vague and allows for broad discretion in its application' (Ni Aoláin, 2020). According to Stephens, Sieckelink and Boutellier (2021), violent extremism posits a distinction between idealistic and behavioural definitions of extremism

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> meaning it can be used to refer to political ideas that are diametrically opposed to a society's core values.[…]Or it can mean the methods by which actors seek to realize any political aim. The concept of 'violent extremism' tends toward a more behavioral than idealistic definition, in that it places focus on violence as a means, rather than the holding of extreme views themselves—in other words, it would be possible to hold 'extreme views' in that they are in opposition to societal values, but not to be a 'violent extremist'.
>
> (p.2)

Based on an extensive review of the literature and historical use of terminologies, Bötticher (2017) suggests that extremism

> exists at the periphery of societies and seeks to conquer its center by creating fear of enemies within and outside society. They divide fellow citizens and foreigners into friends and foes, with no room for diversity of opinions and alternative life-styles. Extremism is, due to its dogmatism, intolerant and unwilling to compromise. Extremists, viewing politics as a zero-sum game, tend – circumstances permitting – to engage in aggressive militancy, including criminal acts and mass violence in their fanatical will for gaining and holding political power.
>
> (p.74)

Extremism is therefore generally understood as destructive, divisive and therefore inherently negative. Bötticher (2017) goes on to compare extremism with radicalism and finds that a major distinction between the two is that 'radical movements tend to use political violence pragmatically and on a selective basis, while extremist movements consider violence against their enemies as a legitimate form of political action and tend to embrace extreme forms of mass violence as part of their political credo' (p.75). Radicalism is therefore considered as a generally positive and constructive, although potentially and strategically violent, political posture. Bötticher proposes radicalism as

> an ideological mindset tends to be very critical of the existing status quo, pursuing the objective of restructuring and/or overthrowing outdated political structures. By their opponents, radicals are often portrayed as violent; but this is only partly correct, as radicalism tends to be associated historically more with a progressive reformism than with utopian extremism, whose glorification of violence it rejects. Radicalism is emancipatory and does not seek to subjugate people and enforce conformity like extremism does.
>
> (p.75)

The notions of **radicalisation**, **radicalism** and **radicality** are inherent to the debate on politico-ideological violence, whereas the latter two refer to a state, similarly to extremism, whereas the former denotes the *process towards that state*. Bonelli & Carrié (2018) suggest defining radicality as 'acts and behaviours

that transgress established norms and the reaction to these transgressions by institutions which see in them a subversive threat to the political and social order of which they are the guardians' (p.16). This definition remains however focused on state-sanctioned definitions ('established norms'). As mentioned, state-centricity in research on the phenomenon at hand is largely unhelpful in analytical terms. In line with Bötticher (2017), McManus (2020) suggests reconceptualising 'radicalism' according to an understanding influenced by the work of Pablo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) as an 'increased commitment to a position one has chosen' that is 'predominantly critical, loving, humble and communicative, and therefore a positive stance' (1970/1996, p.327). A main component of radicalism or radicality is criticality (McManus, 2020). Violent tactics, however, are *not* a necessary corollary of radicality, as Schmid (2013) argues. Reidy (2018) proposes distinguishing between *malevolent* and *benevolent* radicalisation, depending on whether the outcome of radicalisation includes violence or not, whether it is destructive or constructive, anti-social or prosocial. Similarly, Kundnani (2014) suggests that radicalisation, 'in the true political sense of the word', may be the solution to terrorism, not the problem. He refers to a critical and conscious stance with the ability to question injustices and speak truth to power, which is reminiscent of *criticality* as mentioned by McManus (2020). Derfoufi (2020) also insists on a separation of radicalisation from pathways to terrorism. He defines radicalisation as 'the process of growing critical consciousness whereby individuals adopt norms increasingly different to mainstream groups, including belief in the efficacy of non-injurious (certainly non-fatal) forms of direct action' (p.15).

A specific manifestation of military engagement that is relevant for the contemporary discussion of politico-ideological violence in relation to causes beyond one's immediate context, is **foreign fighting**. Foreign fighting is the term that is commonly used to describe individuals who join foreign armies or armed groups. It has become popular with the growing flow of individuals from various countries joining conflict zones in Syria and Iraq (Dawson & Amarasingam, 2017; Hegghammer, 2013; Malet, 2013). The phenomenon per se is, however, not new. Well-known examples are the international mobilisation of an estimated 50,000 revolutionaries for the Spanish civil war to fight against the Franquist regime in the 1930s or around 5,000 individuals from various countries who joined Israeli forces in the 1948 Arab–Israeli War (Carlson et al., 2019). During the 1980s, up to 20,000 individuals joined the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet Union and during the Balkan Wars a similar, yet much smaller wave of foreign fighters joined the Bosnians (Hegghammer, 2013).

The term foreign fighting is technical and will be used for individuals who have travelled abroad to support the military activities of entities not related to the states of which they are citizens. The terms 'terrorism', 'radicality' and 'radicalisation' will be used for purposes of readability, especially where they refer to official definitions or self-descriptions by the actors involved. Broadly speaking, terrorism will usually refer to acts of violence, radicality to an activist posture and mindset, and radicalisation to processes of increased commitment to a cause. Generally, however, and in order to gain some distance from the politicised

debates on terminology, I will be working primarily with the concept of **politico-ideological violence**, which I first defined as 'acts of violence committed in defence of a collective (not individual) cause, justified on political or ideological grounds and seen as inherently moral by the agents of violence themselves' (Ajil, 2022, p.13). Over the course of my doctoral research and based on continuous analysis of the data, I have expanded the definition as follows

> Politico-ideological violence is any form of armed violence by non-state actors that is justified on political and ideological grounds. It is considered morally just and warranted by the actors themselves. Although it is individual in its final materialisation (a person chooses to fight, attack, injure, kill, etc.), it is collective in its conception, for it is employed to defend, protect or revenge a collective that is being seen as suffering from flagrant, recurring and, crucially, unpunished, injustice.

The *political* is closely linked to the notion of *power*: 'Political means relating to the way power is achieved and used in a country or society' ('Political', n.d.). Political justifications in the specific context of PIV refer to the mishandling and abuse of power, as well as imbalances of power, which may lead to disadvantaging certain groups or segments of society. The 'ideological' is inherently normative, for it refers to a set of ideas and principles about how the world should be and how power should be handled. Ideology can be defined as a 'system of general ideas that constitute a body of philosophical and political doctrine on which individual and collective behaviour is based'[1]. Traditionally, ideology is understood as a set of ideas dominating a particular economic or political system. According to a Marxist understanding, an ideology is a set of ideas and values the ruling class employs to justify the mode of production that is dominant and beneficial to the ruling class (Marx, 1978). Similarly, Althusser (1971) defines ideology as a system of representations that serve to mask our actual relations in society, thereby distorting our view and facilitating our control through the state apparatus. In the study of political violence, however, ideology has become associated with the set of ideas that present a specific analysis of the world and provide justifications for violence against a designated enemy. Ideology combines empirical evidence with unsubstantiated ideas. As Shayegan (2014) suggests, 'ideology responds to two needs: The need for belief and the need for justifying that belief' (p.196). Both notions – the political and the ideological – are closely intertwined which warrants their subsumption under the combined adjective 'politico-ideological'. For purposes of readability, the terms political violence and politico-ideological violence will be used interchangeably.

Based on this working definition, we may argue that PIV tends to be seen as 'illegitimate' rather than 'legitimate', because it is employed by non-state actors. Depending on the motives of the main actors, PIV may be associated with either extremism or radicalism as suggested above. It is, however, more likely to be 'revolutionary' rather than 'criminal', because of its collective outlook and the politico-ideological construct that justifies it. Whether political and ideological

constructs as well as grievances are authentic or merely instrumentalised is a question that will be discussed in this book.

How, then, should we go about studying PIV? Which prism should we choose? Focusing on the violence itself is hardly useful in analytical terms, for the same action may have a completely different meaning depending on the context, the one who executes it, and the one who judges it. Focusing on the 'physicality' of violence (e.g., armed attacks, bombings, joining a militia) may be one way of reifying, objectifying and operationalising PIV, but it is still unlikely to tell us anything substantial about the diversity of actors engaged in it. Rather, it is likely to hamper the analytical project, as Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) argue

> Focusing exclusively on the physical aspects of torture/terror/violence misses the point and transforms the project into a clinical, literary, or artistic exercise, which runs the risk of degenerating into a theatre or pornography of violence in which the voyeuristic impulse subverts the larger project of witnessing, critiquing, and writing against violence, injustice, and suffering. (p.1)

Thus, the approach chosen here is intended to move beyond violence and look at the mobilisation towards violence in a more transversal light. The parochial focus on jihadist violence since 9/11 has hampered holistic analysis of the phenomenon at hand. More recently, with the emergence of extremism and radicalisation studies, transversal approaches have started to subsume jihadist, right-wing and left-wing violence under one analytical banner. This has provided some interesting insights into factors that are at play in mobilisations towards violent engagement more generally (although such approaches may miss out on the specific structural, political and cultural components of each group or ideology). In this book, the focus will be on both common factors and those that are specific to each ideological orientation.

Crucially, the focus is extended to individuals who care about similar causes but choose predominantly non-violent tactics for their engagement. Those will be treated as forms of **politico-ideological mobilisation (PIM)**. I suggest PIM as

> committing oneself on an intellectual, emotional and physical level to a cause one strongly cares about for political and ideological convictions. PIM may include individual engagement for, participation in, support of, or sympathy with a group, party or movement that is invested in that cause.

PIM is, therefore, more closely related to dominant understandings of extremism, as opposed to violent extremism. The overarching interest pursued by this approach to the study of PIV *and* PIM is to understand why and how individuals come to act upon grievances and feelings of injustice. How do grievances develop in the first place? While many may hold grievances, why do these individuals choose to act upon them? What do their trajectories look like? How do they narrate their engagement? Is their engagement predominantly violent or non-violent?

If violent tactics are chosen, how are they justified? By combining the narratives of those who end up engaging in various forms of violence for political and ideological reasons with those who have a predominantly non-violent political engagement, this book adopts an innovative and original methodological approach to shed light on these questions.

The Arab World as a focal point

A comprehensive analysis of politico-ideological violence including the various forms it has taken over the course of history would exceed the scope of this study. In this book, I am focusing on politico-ideological mobilisation and violence after 9/11 and in relation to the Arab World. Generally speaking, any engagement where the political and ideological motives refer to geopolitical situations in Arab countries such as Palestine, Syria or Iraq, which have been or become theatres of conflicts over the last two decades, is considered. Forms of contemporary PIV include joining a non-state actor involved in the conflict, participating in fighting and staging attacks. It may also include joining a group with ties to a non-state actor involved in the conflict, but which is active outside the immediate zone of conflict. This includes groups and individuals who plan and stage attacks in countries that are not directly involved in the conflict.

Increased awareness of conflicts in the Arab World has been shown to elicit sentiments of frustration and anger from people who identify strongly with the suffering of civilians (Conway, 2017). Causes linked to Palestine, the Arab World or the suffering of an imagined worldwide Islamic community have become emblematic. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict figures prominently in the narrative repertoire of various movements, ranging from the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (Della Porta, 2013), *Brigate Rosse* (Imarisio, 2003), the Irish Resistance Army (Miller, 2010), Swiss far-left groups (Villiger, 2013), Black freedom struggles (Abdulhadi, 2018; Daulatzai, 2012), Latin American revolutions (Meari, 2018) and groups aligned with Islamist ideologies, from more moderate ones to the most violent (Ahmed, 2005; Hegghammer & Wagemakers, 2013; Lakhani, 2014; Mohamedou, 2018). It is at the core of links between groups in very different contexts, such as Hezbollah and the New IRA (Arab News, 2020) or, formerly, left-wing groups in central Europe and Palestinian liberation fighters (Gyr, 2016). As Palestinian author and member of the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) Ghassan Kanafani once put it: ‘The Palestinian cause is not a cause for Palestinians only, but a cause for every revolutionary, wherever he is, as a cause for the exploited and oppressed masses in our era’ (Meari, 2018, p.50).

Hegghammer and Wagemakers (2013) observed that ‘the ‘Palestine effect’ appears to be a primarily motivational mechanism.[…]It is a fact of political life in the region that many young [men] feel strongly about Palestine and that this emotion often factors into the decision by non-Palestinian Islamists to engage in militancy’ (p.314). Osama Bin Laden himself placed the Palestinian cause at the core of Al-Qaeda’s grievances against the United States, in his videotape following the 9/11 attacks

> The blood pouring out of Palestine must be equally revenged[…]the American people have chosen, consented to, and affirmed their support for the Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, the occupation and usurpation of their land, and its continuous killing, torture, punishment and expulsion of the Palestinians.
>
> (*The Guardian*, 2002)

Elsewhere, researchers have identified a so-called 'Iraq effect' (Wehrey et al., 2010): The invasion of Iraq in 2003 became a *cause célèbre* that offered a narrative of resistance against Western domination, consolidated pre-existing grievances and provided an impetus for engagement in violence. Nesser (2006) found that the perpetrators of violent attacks like the bombing of Madrid or the killing of Theo van Gogh were strongly influenced by Western military operations in Arab countries, such as the occupation of Palestine and the Iraq war. To him, 'the impact of the Iraq war must be understood within the framework of motivational spillover effects from armed conflicts to international terrorism' (p.338). In their study of the Dutch *Hofstadgroup*, that was responsible for the killing of Theo Van Gogh, Schuurman, Bakker and Eijkman (2018) also found that

> in the absence of geopolitical events involving the perceived victimization of Muslim populations and the violent responses that this elicited from groups like al-Qaeda, the Hofstadgroup would arguably not have existed or developed in the way it did. Geopolitically inspired grievances were a key structural-level factor leading to the Hofstadgroup's emergence and motivating the violent intentions of some of its most extremist participants.
>
> (p. 107)

In a study financed by the UN Office of Counterterrorism (UNOCT), conducted by Hamed El-Said and Richard Barrett, and focusing on Lebanese foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), the authors found that

> Unresolved conflicts that include inter-communal violence appear to be one of the strongest magnets for FTFs. A sense of identity with – and a desire to help – co-religionists who are perceived as victimised and mistreated by other groups has developed into a sense of obligation to act in defence of one's in-group. This was one of the most common reasons that individual FTFs in our sample gave for travelling to Syria. Empathy with the Sunni communities in Syria that are portrayed as being under attack as much for their belief as for any other reason was a common theme. For some, this sense of brotherhood was reinforced by a sense of religious obligation.
>
> (El-Said & Barrett, 2017, p.3)

There is also plenty of anecdotal evidence pointing to the fact that Western powers' role in conflicts in Palestine, Syria and Iraq are major motives for terroristic violence in Europe and North America. For instance, the morning preceding the

Orlando shooting, the perpetrator Omar Mateen posted on Facebook: ‘The real Muslims [*sic*] will never accept the filthy ways of the west[…] You kill innocent women and children by doing us airstrikes[…]now taste the Islamic state [*sic*] vengeance’ (Ross et al., 2016). The perpetrator of an attack against Canada’s parliament building, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, had made a video prior to his attack, expressing his motives as being related to Canada’s foreign policies (CBC News, 2014). The perpetrators of the Boston Marathon bombing, the Tsarnaev brothers, also reportedly stated they wanted to take revenge for American military invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (Pearson, 2013). In an interview with a journalist of France’s BFMTV during the afternoon after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, one of the perpetrators, Cherif Kouachi, stated

> We are not killers. We are defenders of the prophet, we don’t kill women. We kill no one. We defend the prophet. If someone offends the prophet then there is no problem, we can kill him. We don’t kill women. We are not like you. You are the ones killing women and children in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. This isn’t us.
>
> (NBC News, 2015)

Finally, the legacy of colonialism and its impact on postcolonial state systems also nurture globally oriented political grievances. In fact, to some authors, contemporary forms of political violence cannot be dissociated from the consequences of violence perpetrated in the era of colonialism and imperialism (Burgat, 2016; Dabashi, 2011). Mohamedou (2018) describes this effect as ‘colonialism boomerang’. As he puts it, with reference to the group ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria): ‘*Return to sender* is in effect the motto of the violence counter-produced, remixed and shipped back by ISIS to the imperial centres’ (p.2).

The emergence of jihadist groups has also drawn attention to the imaginary of a transnational Islamic collective. While these groups use this imaginary to reinforce feelings of solidarity and responsibility, the imaginary exists independently of their agendas (Piscatori, 2019). The imaginary of the transnational Islamic community, of course, spans far beyond the Arab World (itself, in fact, a similar imaginary). While some Arab Muslims may consider Arabness and Muslimness as closely entangled, the collective imaginary is much more plural in the eyes of most, especially Christian or Jewish, secular or atheist Arabs. The idea of an ‘Arab nation’, built on a common language and cultural heritage, is ubiquitous in an age of global connectedness through social media and transnational movements (Ouassini & Ouassini, 2020). Pan-Arab nationalism gave rise to transnational Arab socialist projects of *Baathism* or *Nasserism* and materialised to a certain degree institutionally in the form of the Arab League, which comprises 22 nations across Asia and Africa. It goes without saying that, as Ramsay and Alkheder (2020) point out, while the ‘Arab World’ may be understood as an imagined political and cultural geography, one would be mistaken to assume a monolithic Arab identity.

Specific Arab countries such as Iraq or Syria have also received significant media coverage since the turn of the century, and their civil wars have attracted foreign fighters from over 100 countries globally (UN News, 2015). Because individuals relate to the causes and conflicts in the Arab World via different imaginaries which exceed religion, a focus on the Arab World allows for a variety of trajectories of engagement and underlying ideologies, while maintaining a common politico-cultural focal point. It is therefore not surprising that the present study includes individuals from very different ideological orientations, such as left-wing, right-wing, Salafi-jihadist, Shiite militantism, pan-Arabism or socialist internationalism.

Note

1 'Système d'idées générales constituant un corps de doctrine philosophique et politique à la base d'un comportement individuel ou collectif' ('Idéologie', n.d.).

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