TURKEY'S FIGHT AGAINST YOUTH RADICALISATION: SMALL STEPS ON A LONG PATH

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Introduction

Though not a new phenomenon, radicalisation among youths has become a growing issue of concern both in the EU and neighbouring countries as there has been a notable increase in the incidences of religious, ethnic and ideological radicalism and extremism across the region in the last decade, including hate speech and crime, racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and terrorism. The fact that in most cases the perpetrators were not foreign nationals but young locals[1] who had been lured into a process of cognitive or behavioural radicalisation has highlighted the urgent need to take preventive actions against marginalisation, social and economic exclusion and discrimination, all of which might contribute to the vulnerability of the said group. Moreover, it has stimulated the efforts to develop comprehensive strategies and targeted programmes for deradicalisation and disengagement of those already radicalised.

Despite the broad scope of the literature that has been produced on the concept, we still know very little about radicalisation. There is complexity and ambivalence inherent in the process since each individual case proposes different (and sometimes conflictual) sets of reasons, motivations, relations and, therefore, inferences and lessons for the future. In addition, there are innumerable factors interacting on individual, group and societal levels that cannot be identified or measured and, in the end, are bound to be overlooked. Hence, it is not surprising that the precautions and countermeasures taken against radicalisation remain insufficient in many cases.

At this point, the case of Turkey is no exception. The country has been a target of various forms of radicalisation throughout history but its struggle has recently become more complex and compelling due to various domestic and regional reasons. The Turkish

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1 Detailed analyses on victims and perpetrators of the recent incidents that have taken place in the EU member states, for instance, can be found in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights reports (2016, 2017a, 2017b).

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government has been combining hard and soft approaches and resorting to different methods such as stricter border controls, military operations, counter-narratives established by relevant institutions, education programmes and projects targeting youths, and amplified international cooperation. Regardless, youth radicalisation and extremism continue to pose serious threats to the country.

This brief asserts that the underlying reasons that the Turkish government is unable to address and tackle this issue in a more efficient way are the lack of specific targets and measures for different types of radicalisation; sustainable, long-term policies; and analytical evidence to support them due to the politicisation of the subject, inadequate intelligence sharing among agencies, and disinclination to cooperate with academics and experts. As a result, the brief argues that 1) a comprehensive and detailed national strategy against radicalisation processes of a different nature should be constituted; 2) inter-agency coordination on both intelligence and operation should be established; 3) consultation and cooperation with those who have expertise in this specific field should be increased; and 4) academic studies aiming to gain a better understanding of the concept should be supported and encouraged in order to achieve long-term objectives.

The Unique Case of Turkey

Located between Europe and the Middle East with a very long and permeable land border with two turbulent countries, Syria and Iraq, and large-scale refugee inflows, Turkey has a distinct geopolitical status that makes its relationship with youth radicalisation different from that of other countries. However, Turkey's exceptional status does not solely derive from its location. There are also domestic features, which create push and pull factors specific to the Turkish case along with the socio-political and socioeconomic reasons that lie behind radicalisation.

Turkey is a country of nearly 80 million people, who enjoy a relatively high standard of living, literacy rate and political participation. While approximately 98% of the population identifies as Muslim, the religious literacy is also high since all schoolchildren are required to attend a compulsory class on "Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge" from the 4th grade to the 12th grade. Apart from the Ministry of National Education (MEB), the Directorate of Religious Affairs, *Diyanet,* is an important source of religious education.[2] Therefore, it can be said that the religious training in the country is centralised and sufficiently monitored. Moreover, Turkey is known for

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2 *Diyanet* provides non-formal religious education at mosques and Quran courses through "*talim,* instruction in the Quran, hadith, and sometimes law; and *tarbiyah*, the building of a moral personality" (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2017).

being the home of "Anatolian" or "Sufi" Islam, which promotes a peaceful, tolerant, non-violent understanding of Islam and personal spiritual growth (Anaz, Aslan, & Özkan, 2016). In other words, the foremost factors of radicalisation such as weak governance, extreme poverty, illiteracy, religious ignorance or propensity for violence are not prominent in the Turkish case. Instead, individualised or context-specific factors appear to be more relevant.

Turkey has been struggling with different kinds of sociopolitical conflicts since its creation. The years-long Kurdish issue, Armenian question, Cyprus dispute, Alevi-Sunni clashes, headscarf controversy and many others have directly or indirectly divided the society, bred the antagonistic feelings and discourses among the public, and led different social elements to become alienated at different times. Military coups and attempted coups in the country's history, as well as military regimes' repressive policies, have also fostered the existing tensions. These animosities have driven and presumably will continue to drive people towards radical ideas and behaviours and induce an increase in support for existing radical groups or the appearance of new ones.

The attempted coup that was planned and carried out by the Gulen Movement[3] in July 2016 has been the most recent example of the increasing enmity and disintegration in Turkish society. The faction within the military was stopped within a few hours by citizens, who took to the streets but more than 250 people were killed and 2,000 were injured (many of whom were civilians) on that night of chaos and violence. Since then, the country has been in a state of emergency. More than 110,000 state employees have been dismissed and some 50,000 have been arrested through the decrees issued by the government. While it has been deemed necessary by the government, this purge has resulted in stagnation and dysfunction of the bureaucracy and weakening of cooperation and exchange of intelligence among agencies since the followers of Gulen are believed to have infiltrated many government institutions and investigations are underway. It has also caused thousands of people to lose their jobs, civil and economic rights, and social status. In addition to the psychological trauma following the night of the failed coup attempt, people have suffered distress, fear and depression arising from the political uncertainty, constant surveillance and emergency powers granted to the police and other state officials over the last year.

This conflictual societal nature has inevitably affected public perception and reaction to violence. With every incident, the threat and use of violence have gradually become embedded in Turkish society and politics. Today, if nothing else, the daily news on

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3 The Gulen movement is a political community that is named after Fethullah Gülen, a US-based Islamic preacher and leader, who was said to have followers in the military, intelligence, police and judiciary in Turkey and tried to overthrow the Erdoğan government.

martyrs, brawls between refugees and locals or physical abuse of women and children normalise and legitimatise violence in all segments of society and make intimidation and menace part of the everyday narrative. Eventually, the political discourse and practice also change in line with this normalisation process and become more aggressive, outrageous, and exclusionary. From the Gezi protests to recent incidents in southeastern Turkey, jailed opposition party leaders to beaten and gassed protestors, the violence has been evolving into one of the dominant elements of Turkish politics, creating its vicious cycle. In an environment like this, any kind of radicalisation would be imminent as it would be harder for a person, who is constantly exposed to insult, oppression, threat and punishment, to seek peaceful, constructive and democratic solutions.

Finally, yet importantly, Turkey has been both a transit and a host country to Syrian refugees since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. The number of the registered Syrians in Turkey (along with thousands of Afghani and Pakistani refugees and asylum seekers) has reached 3 million, which makes the country the home of the largest refugee population in the world. Around 90% of Syrian refugees live outside camp settings (Erdoğan, 2017), with very limited access to basic services. The Turkish government granted Syrians "temporary protection status" in 2014 and, in principle, access to education, healthcare and work but facilities are still very limited. Potentially traumatised, exposed to violence and still living under harsh conditions, Syrian refugees in Turkey, especially the children and youths, are vulnerable to radicalisation among many other risks.[4] If not prevented, this may turn out to be one of the most enduring legacies of the Syrian conflict for Turkey.

In addition, even though the government's open door policy is supported by some, the overwhelming majority of Turkish society holds negative feelings towards refugees (Poushter, 2015; Turkish Perceptions Survey, 2015). There is a growing concern among citizens about the large numbers and permanent presence of Syrians as well as their visibility in the public sphere. Refugees are often blamed for increasing costs of living and crime rates, deterioration of social services, decreased wages and soaring unemployment. So far, incidences of violent action against refugees have been few in number. However, the design and implementation of a progressive integration policy with a holistic, coherent strategy are needed in the long term. Otherwise, the radicalisation of Turkish nationals against Syrian refugees might become another issue of concern.

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4 Here, it is by no means argued that there is a direct link between refugees and radicalisation. However, the vulnerability of the refugees against radicalisation has been emphasised by different actors from bureaucracy, civil society and academia (Boffey, 2017; Comerford, 2017; Council of Europe, 2016; Sude, Stebbins, & Weilant, 2015).

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Radicalisation and Turkey: A Decades-Old Tale

In this paper, radicalism is not seen as the first step of a linear scale that has violent extremism or terrorism at the end but rather a relational dynamic that fluctuates and transforms over time. Radicalism is being positioned as distant from "the mainstream". It is a relative time and place-specific concept. What we perceive as "radical" changes as political and social realities are constantly redefined and rearticulated. Any given example of a radical actor, ideational basis or behaviour might abruptly become irrelevant for different settings and cases.

One obstacle while studying radicalism is the vagueness of the guidelines on how to identify the proxies. The current conceptual and theoretical frameworks enable us to identify and understand violent behaviours to a certain degree but they are not much help in analytical terms when inquiring into mental or cognitive radicalisation. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to provide an overview that includes all radicalisation processes at once. Any study on radicalisation, including this very paper, is bound to miss more than it covers. Another obstacle derives from the case selection. While the research on radicalisation in Turkey acknowledges youths as one of the most vulnerable groups (Kurt, 2015; Marks, 2016; ORSAM, 2017), the lack of exact figures causes the majority of the literature to remain anecdotal. Youth radicalisation is not studied discretely and in detail – which constitutes one of the shortcomings that are addressed here. In line with these limitations and the aim of this brief, the exemplification of different radicalisation processes in Turkey is narrowed down to the biggest and most active radical groups, namely Marxist-Leninists, Kurdish separatists and radical Islamists (Bastug & Evlek, 2016; Sözen, 2006).

The first group was predominant, especially in student organisations across the country during the 1970s and the 1980s. Starting from the 1990s, it has gone into a decline and significantly lost power. The most prominent examples of this group have been the Turkish Communist Party: Marxist and Leninist Turkish Worker and Peasant Liberation Army (TIKKO) and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C). While the former has not been very active, DHKP-C has been responsible for many attacks in the last decade. Still, this group is relatively smaller and less violent compared to the other two.

The Kurdish separatists in Turkey have been mainly represented by the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). Initially, PKK had aspired to establish an independent Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey and carried out numerous terrorist attacks, targeting mostly law-enforcement officers for this cause. After the founder and leader of the organisation Abdullah Öcalan was captured in 1999, PKK adopted a new approach focusing on the recognition of the Kurdish identity and limited autonomy (Yılmaz, 2011) and yet continued

its attacks. In 2013, the Turkish government and PKK made a cease-fire agreement (also known as "the Peace Process") but the truce remained fragile and was often interrupted by reciprocal attacks. In 2015, accusing the Turkish government of expanding military posts and infrastructure to carry out an attack and for supporting Jihadist groups against the Democratic Union Party (PYD; a PKK-affiliated Kurdish group in Syria), PKK unilaterally ended the peace process. Since then, the armed conflict between the parties has restarted, escalating the numbers of incidents and casualties unprecedentedly. The intense armed conflict and security operations after the collapse of the ceasefire have also resulted in the displacement of thousands of civilians and massive destruction in southeastern districts of the country.

Lastly, the radical Islamist/Jihadist entities date back to the 1980s, after the Islamic revolution in Iran (Çağlar, 2006). In the 1990s, Turkish Hezbollah was predominantly active in southeastern Turkey. Later, it began to spread to other parts of the country and recruit members and equipment. Within this period, hundreds of people were killed in the attacks of the group. Since the trials in the early 2000s, the group has kept a low profile. After 9/11, the radical Islamist groups transformed from domestic to international as al-Qaeda gained momentum and found sympathisers in Turkey. The government responded by taking part in the US-led war on global terrorism and allocating resources to a counterterrorism strategy that was mostly based on hard power. Currently, Jabhat al Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate, is claimed to be active in Turkey in terms of recruitment. However, the group has not perpetrated any attacks in Turkey or demonstrated an interest in doing so (Marks, 2016).

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), on the other hand, has been a major threat for Turkey lately. After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, some commentators argued that the Turkish government took a position against the Assad regime and turned a blind eye to the radical Islamist groups there.[5] In fact, Turkey was claimed to be one of the largest sources of foreign fighters (Barrett et al., 2015) and a transit country at the time. The government was accused of adopting an open door policy to Jihadists, making the country "a Jihadist highway" through which foreign fighters flowed into and out of Iraq and Syria (Arango & Schmitt, 2015; McCaul, 2014; Uslu, 2016). It was also accused of providing military supplies and equipment (Faiola & Mekhennet, 2014) and training to ISIS fighters ("Captured ISIS Fighter Says", 2015).

ISIS conducted 79 terrorist attacks in Turkey, causing hundreds of casualties between 2013 and 2016 (START, 2017). Some commentators framed these attacks as an inevitable result

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5 The government's intention was claimed to subdue PKK and the Kurdish fighters of the Popular Protection Units (YPG), which was widely regarded as one of the most effective forces fighting against ISIS. As Turkey continued bombardments in the region, ISIS allegedly gained strength to attack Kurdish-held frontline areas in Syria and Iraq.

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of Ankara's lax border policy. Conversely, the Turkish government officials asserted their commitment to fighting ISIS several times and underlined the lack of regional cooperation and burden sharing. It was argued that Turkey's efforts were recognised and supported by other countries only after they themselves were targeted by ISIS. The Turkish officials saw this delayed attention as the product of these countries' self-interested fears and criticised their apathy regarding the damage the PKK-supported terrorism had caused in Turkey (Marks, 2016) but they still took part in the regional cooperation. The next section will briefly discuss the intensified efforts to combat radicalism and violent extremism in this period.

The Path Taken and the Path Ahead

As is shown above, radicalism in Turkey has taken different forms and manifestations throughout the years. The governments' response to this has been composed of both hard and soft measures.

Starting with the hard measures and counterterrorism dimension, the focus has recently been on PKK and ISIS. In the first half of 2017, 837 terrorists were neutralised while 144 were captured and 157 were forced to surrender ("PKK ile Mücadelede", 2017). The border control in southeastern Turkey has been significantly increased with walls, fences, ditches and upgraded lighting (ORSAM, 2017). Moreover, Risk Analysis Units were established, numerous cross-border operations were launched, and strategic towns and provinces were recaptured from ISIS, such as al-Bab, Azaz and Jarabulus. The government has also pledged further cooperation with other countries, including the United States, Germany, Russia, Belgium and Iran.

In addition to these measures, the government has considerably enhanced the surveillance of the online content in order to preclude online propaganda and recruitment. Numerous websites, magazines, social media accounts and other forms of media that were affiliated with radical groups have been shuttered.

As for the soft measures and deradicalisation/disengagement dimension, Turkey has mainly adopted two approaches. On the one hand, *Diyanet* has focused on emphasising the peaceful side of Islam and sending anti-Jihadist messages. For this purpose, a sermon, which was entitled "Islam: the Religion Targeted by Global Terror" was distributed and read at over 80,000 mosques in Turkey and 2,000 mosques abroad in 2015 (Marks, 2016). The institution has also shared special messages focusing on refugees and foreign nationals in Turkey during Friday prayers and organised educational camps for children.

On the other hand, the Turkish National Police and related intelligence and security directorates have coordinated an outreach programme, aiming to prevent recruitment in

vulnerable communities (Marks, 2016), as well as disengagement and deradicalisation programmes aimed at those who have been involved in radical organisations. One example is the pilot programme that was held in Adana, a major city in southern Turkey (Bastug & Evlek, 2016). Although this programme targeted individuals from nationalist, left-wing, faith-based groups[6] all at once without focusing on specific motivations and processes for each group, it was deemed successful in the end. With this programme, 226 militants out of 333 were convinced to disengage from the nationalist groups with which they were associated. The numbers were lower but still significant for the other groups, with 33 out of 74 militants for the left-wing and 20 out of 48 militants for the faith-based groups.

In addition to these institutions, several ministries have taken part in the fight against radicalisation by developing rehabilitation and counselling programmes, establishing youth centres, embodying educational and employment incentives, and conducting awareness-raising activities.[7] Some of these works have specifically targeted refugee children and youths. The government has also cooperated with other countries and international organisations through projects that aim to facilitate the integration of refugees into the Turkish community by fostering understanding for diversity, intercultural dialogue and tolerance and respect for others. In addition, the personnel in refugee camps have undergone training in areas of psychology, communication, health, and law (ORSAM, 2017) to improve community services and safeguard the fundamental rights of the refugees at camps.

These examples indicate that the Turkish government has had a determined stand and some good practices against radicalisation, especially in terms of security-oriented, hard approaches. Nevertheless, there are certain inadequacies in terms of efficiency and sustainability of the adopted strategies. For instance, it is not possible to know how many people listened to *Diyanet's* sermon or whether the messages were received by them. Moreover, as Anaz, Aslan and Özkan (2016) showed, the sympathisers of radical groups are already "dissatisfied with everyday religious practices and traditionally accepted Islamic views." It is highly possible that they avoid mosques and boycott imams since they believe imams are performing "a softened religion" under *Diyanet.* While constructing a counterterrorism narrative through *Diyanet* is important in terms of fighting radicalisation, its effectiveness and success are unknown.

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6 The name of the groups are not mentioned in the study.

7 The report that was prepared in accordance with Resolution 30/15 by the United Nations Human Rights Council (2016) contains some information on the programmes and projects conducted by the relevant government authorities but does not include detail on the names, methods, results or outputs. When contacted, the authorities in question stated that they were unable to give any information concerning these works (personal communication, 14 September 2017).

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Another example would be related to the pilot programme in Adana. Despite its favourable outcomes, the programme (among several others) was terminated after the ceasefire with PKK was broken in 2015, and ISIS started to openly target Turkey for terrorist attacks. The Turkish government adopted a new approach that depended mostly on hard power (Bastug & Evlek, 2016) as a response to these organisations, resulting in the obsolescence of non-coercive measures. Accordingly, the local authorities followed this adaptation and suspended the programmes and initiatives they had launched.

The concept of radicalisation is inherently political. Governments might change their strategies on this issue depending on bilateral relations and emerging developments – especially when it comes to hard measures. However, deradicalisation and disengagement of those who are already radicalised are of capital importance in combatting such beliefs and behaviours, even in times of hot conflict. Therefore, any work concerning these issues should be continued unconditionally.

The aforementioned strategies should also be long-dated and comprehensive in order to avert the political nature of the concept. For instance, the Turkish government banned the leading ISIS websites and social media accounts in 2015. Before that, the online propaganda content for ISIS including videos, songs and articles was easily accessible (Marks, 2016). Moreover, there are still many active websites and accounts that sympathise with other radical groups and organisations[8] whereas they should have been in the scope of the ban, along with all other dangerous content, without any necessity of immediate threat.

Another criticism might be raised against the insufficiency of cooperation and consultation with experts and academics in development of new strategies and programmes. Because of the well-known security- and ethics-related reasons, conducting research on radicalism is already extremely hard. While field research is needed to corroborate information on radicalisation and provide further insights into the phenomenon, the governmental support and incentive for such initiatives are still limited, and academics often struggle with practical aspects of research. For instance, it has not been not long since the Higher Education Council (YÖK) informed academics across the Turkish universities that permission from the relevant ministries would be needed in order to conduct any type of survey or fieldwork among Syrian refugees.[9] Similarly, when the Temporary Protection Regulation was first issued, its content was not shared with academics.

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8 For example, Marks (2016) points out that the websites and account that are linked to al Nusra have not been affected by the government crackdown and are still available today.

9 The reason given for this restriction was the protection of the refugees' privacy. The restriction was removed after a couple months.

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The government institutions also do not publicise the figures on the demographic breakdown of recruitments or privately share them with those who study radicalisation. Because of the ongoing state of emergency in the country, it has become even harder to obtain information from these institutions. The researchers are trying to examine the subject in the absence of large-scale data on fundamental information such as age, ethnicity, religious belief, location or social, economic, educational and professional background. As a result, the concept remains underexplored.

Conclusion

Turkey has been suffering from different types of radicalisation for a long time and youths have been the primary victims of this trend. With the emergence of new regional and global threats in addition to the inherent domestic ones, it is vital for the Turkish government to take proactive measures to combat radical ideas and behaviours. The current efforts exerted by the government have been producing successful results. However, there is still a need to enhance and improve them with differentiated instructions, analytical evidence and large-scale cooperation between the public sector, civil society and academia.

This brief acknowledges radicalisation as a global phenomenon and recognises the difficulties involved in the fight against it. In the long term, the social, economic and political drivers need to be eliminated to avert this process indefinitely but, to do so, the complexity and profundity of the concept should be recognised and its core patterns should be unveiled. Radicalisation should be treated as an academic subject, not only as a political issue. The authorities need to adopt a realistic, consistent, long-term approach that involves comprehensive and yet specialised, tailor-made measurements for different radicalisation processes. They should commit to work with full capacity, ensure cooperation among agencies, collaborate with regional and global actors, and make greater use of researchers and academics as specialised consultants.

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