Written Evidence Submission by Professor Mark Sedgwick

Building Resilience to Radicalisation in MENA:
Defining and Decoding Radicalisation

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Executive summary

The terms "radicalization" and "extremism" are useful for denoting the phenomenon with which we are concerned, but not for defining or delimiting it. When we try to use these terms to define or delimit, we come up against multiple conceptual problems, which is one reason why there is no consensus on the meaning of the terms. But definition and delimitation are essential, as most significant political groups in the MENA region might be understood as radical extremists in Western terms. Different analytical tools are therefore needed. One of the most useful is to focus on the position of groups and individuals, not on abstract ideas. Groups can be classified in terms of their relations with the West, and individuals can be classified in terms of their relations with particular groups. This is a good basis for defining and delimiting the phenomenon with which we are concerned, and thus for addressing it.

The terms "radicalization" and "extremism" are useful for denoting the background to the terrorism and violence that currently concerns Western governments and peoples, but are less useful for defining or delimiting that phenomenon. This submission therefore recommends a focus on the concrete, on the positions of groups and individuals, rather than on the abstract.

The terms "radicalization" and "extremism" are widely used, and identify a particular phenomenon clearly enough. They are also politically useful, as they make it possible to avoid using words like "Islamism" that may be confused by some members of the public with "Islam". There are, however, limits to the usefulness of both terms. Some terms, like "drunken driving", define as well as denote. More than 80 milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of a driver's blood defines drunken driving in England. Other terms, often relating to more complex phenomena, denote but do not define, like "unhappy". We all know what unhappiness is, but the term does not help us distinguish unhappiness from dejection, gloom or melancholy. In this respect, the terms "radicalism" and "extremism" resemble "unhappiness", not "drunken driving". This is one reason why there are so many competing definitions and understandings of radicalism, radicalisation, and extremism. All point in the same direction, identifying the same broad phenomenon, but different definitions and understandings delimit the phenomenon very differently, and therefore understand and explain it very differently.

The problems with the terms "radicalism" and "extremism" are both conceptual and practical. Conceptually, the first problem is that the terms indicate degree, not kind. There are radical or extreme positions on many issues, from feminism to the future of the European Union. Not all types of radicalism are the same, and the radical can be good as well as bad. On its own, then, the term "radical" does not mean very much. And some views will always be extreme, given that most views on any topic cluster towards the centre. Removing the highest and lowest percentiles in a normal distribution does not alter the fact that there *are* higher and lower percentiles. A second problem is that what is radical is always context dependent, varying from place to place and time to time. Latvian nationalism that is now mainstream was radical in the last decades of the Soviet Union. Views on gay rights that are mainstream in the UK today would have been radical in the UK in the 1930s, as they are radical in China today.

Some scholars have tried to get away from these conceptual problems by identifying radicalism and extremism with particular *types* of view rather than with *degrees* of view. Some scholars point to the derivation of "radical" from the Latin *radix*, a root, and suggest that the radical wants fundamental change—wants to uproot the tree—while the moderate only seeks reform—to prune the tree. The radical sees things in black and white, while the moderate understands that there are always shades of grey. Others associate radicalism and extremism with particular positions, for example the position that democracy should be replaced by some other system, or that the use of violence is justified.

None of these approaches is of much use when it comes to the MENA region. The view that fundamental change is needed is widespread, perhaps even a majority view, and so can hardly be understood as radical, or combated as such. In the 2000s, it was even American and British policy to promote fundamental change in the region. In countries where a civil war is raging, gradual reform is hardly an option. My own view is that the fundamental changes that have taken place in Tunisia recently were good, and that fundamental change is currently needed in Egypt. Seeing the MENA landscape in black and white is perhaps less prevalent than seeing a need for fundamental change there, but is still very prevalent, in the West as well as in the region. If it is radical, then most people are radical, which gets us nowhere.

Similarly, the understanding of radicalism in terms of the position that democracy should be replaced by some other system does not get us very far in the MENA region. Democracy is not really there in the first place, and so can hardly be replaced. No state in the region can be described as fully democratic, and most are not democratic in any meaningful way at all. It is in fact radical to argue *for* democracy in some parts of the region.

The position that the use of violence is justified, in contrast, is a minority position, at least outside states where civil wars are being fought. The problem here is that to define radicalism and extremism in terms of non-state violence is, in effect, to define them as terrorism, in which case we might as well simply talk about terrorism.

A further problem with the terms "radicalization" and "extremism" is that they focus attention on individuals and ideas, and away from deeper root causes. It is not just individuals and ideas that are now generally agreed by historians to have been the

causes of earlier conflicts and waves of terrorism. Emphasis is instead put on economic and political structures, on shifts in ethnic make-up or the balance of power, and so on. These deeper root causes also require attention, today as in earlier periods.

The terms "radicalization" and "extremism", then, are of little use in defining or delimiting the phenomenon with which we are concerned. They do not help us to draw the lines that need to be drawn if we are going to focus our efforts where they should be focused, rather than diluting our efforts by expanding our understanding of the phenomenon and the scope of our activities excessively. In the absence of effective, delimiting definitions, there is a risk that almost any political group in the region might be considered radical extremists. In the Arab East, the only obvious exceptions are Kurdish, and even they are radical extremists from the perspective of Turkey. Even some governments would count as radical extremists in Western terms, the Saudi government because of the views promoted by its religious establishment, and the Syrian and the Iraqi governments because of their reliance on Shi'a militias.

Under these circumstances, it makes sense to look instead at root causes, at groups and at individuals. This is not the only possible way to define and delimit the phenomenon, but it is a practical one that can be easily operationalized. Sometimes, different definitions are needed for different purposes, as it is not always the case that a definition that is useful for analytical purposes can be easily operationalized, or that a definition that is useful operationally is useful analytically. More inclusive definitions may be good for telling one where to look, and more exclusive definitions may tell one where not to waste time looking.

Like all other violent conflicts, current MENA-related terrorism and civil war has root causes, and these are located primarily in the MENA region. There are multiple and long-standing political, ideological, social and religious conflicts that are both complex and deep. They will be resolved over time, as conflicts always are, but this may take centuries. It is important to note that any comprehensive solution is beyond the power of any outside actor. Western states have been involved in the MENA region since Napoleon landed in Egypt in 1798, and more than two centuries' involvement has failed to produce a lasting settlement. The actions of Western states have in fact contributed to creating problems as much as to solving them. This is as true of the recent period as it is of earlier periods. It does not mean that outside actors can do nothing useful, but it does mean that it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved, and also to be aware of the risk that interventions may cause harm rather than good. Increased polarization, for example, must be avoided at all costs.

From the point of view of defining and decoding the phenomenon, a focus on looking at groups and individuals can be extremely productive. Groups and individuals can easily be classified as hostile to the West, as friendly, or as neutral. At one extreme, the so-called Islamic State is very clearly hostile, while at the other extreme, the Kurdish People's Protection Units in northern Syria are very clearly friendly—perhaps opportunistically, but friendly all the same. Other groups can be placed between these two extremes. Individuals, both in the MENA region and in the West, can then be placed in relation to particular groups. Someone may, for example, be a member of a group, a "fellow traveller" who accepts a group's narrative and perspective without actually joining it, or merely sympathetic towards a group and/or its positions. This system of

classification requires detailed knowledge of groups and individuals, but is conceptually straight-forward and a sound basis for the distinctions that need to be made. Difficulties arise when a group is not hostile to the West but is hostile to a government with which the West is on friendly terms, as when Kurds or the Gülen Movement are hostile to the current government of Turkey or the Muslim Brotherhood is hostile to the current government of Egypt, but these difficulties can be solved.

The focus on groups and individuals that this submission advocates as a response to the conceptual and practical problems with the terms "radicalization" and "extremism" has a parallel in the Cold War period. The West then frequently criticized particular Communist states for concrete shortcomings, for example for their human rights record and the lack of freedom from which their inhabitants suffered. The West did not target abstract ideas such as the Marxist labour theory of value. This proved to be the right approach. In the same way, the West should now focus on the shortcomings of groups and related individuals that are hostile to it, rather than on abstract ideas that may or may not be "radical" or "extreme", depending on definition and perspective.