

Managing militant Islamism in Norway: A process-oriented perspective

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Abstract: This paper provides a retrospective process-oriented analysis of the management of militant Islamism in Eastern Norway between 2009 and 2019. “Management” refers to the myriad of social control measures employed by state and non-state actors. The paper traces changes in the ways in which this management is practiced by the key actors involved, by examining their interaction with the militant Islamist milieu and with key events at the national and international levels. This particularly includes foreign fighters and others attracted to armed groups in Syria after 2011, and to the Caliphate that was announced in 2014. The period is analyzed as an “episode of contention” that is distinguished into five different phases, that follows the escalation and de-escalation of conflict between the militant Islamist milieu, and those tasked to manage them, in Norway. The paper conveys the close dynamic relationship between efforts to manage militant Islamist networks in Eastern Norway and the mobilization and demobilization of the global Salafi-jihadist movement. The analysis builds on qualitative data, including observation in criminal trials against militant Islamists in Norway and interviews with public servants involved in the management of militant Islamism in Eastern Norway.

Management of militant islamists in Norway and beyond

This paper examines developments in the management of militant Islamism (MI) in Eastern Norway, from 2009 to 2019. This “episode” was extraordinary in terms of the security risks associated with MI in Norway and internationally. This threat attracted increased attention from 2012 in Norway, when a “homegrown” militant Islamist milieu became manifest with the establishment of Profetens Ummah (PU). PU’s activities were closely linked to the international Salafi-jihadist movement in other European countries, and in Syria and Iraq where armed Salafi-jihadist groups attracted foreign fighters² and supporters from across the globe. In June 2014, the same month as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) announced their Caliphate, the Norwegian government launched its governmental Action plan against radicalization and violent extremism. The plan involved a list of proposed measures, emphasizing enhanced cross-sectoral cooperation and collaborative measures to strengthen the local work to prevent all forms of violent extremism. The main concerns and use of resources among those involved in such multi-agency collaborations was, however, related to MI throughout this episode. Many of the involved actors were relatively unfamiliar with the phenomenon of MI when it rose to prominence between 2012 and 2015 in Norway. To

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² Can be defined as “an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid (Hegghammer 2010: 57-58)

manage the threat that emerged with the new militant Islamist milieu in Eastern Norway, new knowledge, means and collaborative structures had to be swiftly established by a series of initiatives by state, private and civil society actors.

When the existing knowledge and means available in organizations proves insufficient to tackle a new challenge, this is likely to trigger creativity and innovation of new measures (e.g., Jasper 2015). Such scenarios are analytically interesting because they involve ruptures of the established ways of doing things and rapid organizational changes, which can be captured analytically. The “episode” examined here, involved a series of innovations in the management of militant Islamist activists.

Episode is an analytical concept, referring to a bounded sequence of continuous interaction between contending parties, which herein has been defined by chopping up longer streams of contention into temporal segments for the purpose of analysis (Tilly 2008: 10). My analysis seeks to identify central triggers and features of how and when management of MI developed throughout the current episode. Developments in the management of militant Islamism is analysed in a wider context: by attending its interaction with the militant Islamist milieu in Eastern Norway and the global Salafist-jihadist movement it was part of, as well as key events at the national and international level that influenced militant Islamists and those that sought to manage them.

[Multi-agency collaborations in contemporary policing](#)

The prevention of violent extremism is a core example of what is known as a “wicked problem”: a problem which no single actor has the information or capacity to handle singly, and which is almost impossible to eliminate (Bjørgero and Gjelsvik 2015: 254). In the Nordic countries, governments currently emphasize increased cooperative efforts across state, municipal and civil society actors to strengthen efforts at countering violent extremism (CVE). This happens as states increasingly acknowledge that they cannot stop violent extremism by coercive force alone, and that solely relying on law enforcement responses may actually create more problems than it solves (Bjørgero and Horgan 2009: 2). More sophisticated and pluralised forms of efforts are thus emerging internationally (Sivenbring 2016). The Nordic nations’ governmental action plans against radicalization and violent extremism, launched between 2010-2016, exemplifies this trend. Internationally, similar developments are evident, for example, in the UK’s Prevent programme and in how American and Australian governments emphasize the need to partner with and to empower local communities and local government in CVE efforts (Dalgaard-Nielsen and Schack 2016). Collaborative CVE efforts that involves schools, social services, civil society organizations, families, religious societies and local communities, together with the police and secret services, are a relatively new phenomenon in the Nordic countries.

[Development of policies and practices for countering violent extremism](#)

Analysis of this decade-long episode makes evident the close relationships between municipal CVE work and national CVE policy on one side, and the relations between the militant

Islamist milieu in Eastern Norway and the international Salafist-jihadist movement on the other side. This underlines the need to position the case of Eastern Norway in its wider context, for understanding how and why management of militant Islamism has changed in this region. My analysis convey considerable changes of the ways in which our society conduct social control of persons associated with radicalization and violent extremism in Norway. Analysing these developments by distinguishing them into temporal sequences provides a part explanation of how management of militant Islamism has played out and developed over the last ten years. The process-oriented analysis identified several changes across the five phases, in national policies, legislation, criminal justice responses, resource allocation, collaborative structures and multi-agency measures. The developments in management of militant Islamism throughout this episode has partially laid the ground for future CVE work.

Radicalization and violent extremism has further changed from being an issue for law enforcement, to becoming the responsibility of citizens, local communities and an array of state and private actors – both in Norway, Scandinavia and internationally. From a situation marked by little and no local knowledge about militant Islamist activism and RVE in 2009, many Norwegian municipalities and regional agencies have now gained knowledge, as well as practical experience. The urgent security threat associated with the global Salafist-jihadist movement from 2012 in Norway (and beyond) clearly assisted the wide impact of the government's action plan against RVE in 2014. This policy further helped establish the new logic that imply a clear responsibility for a variety of actors in specific and less specific tasks across the local, regional and national levels. The implementation of these new responsibilities, measures and work logics have been crucial in creating the fundament for what is now a loose nation-wide structure and apparatus for CVE.

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