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CHAPTER XX

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A Toolbox for Countering Extremist Religious Doctrines

Chap_author

Shmuel Bar

Chap_affiliation

IntuView Ltd
Samuel Neeman Institute Technion, Haifa, Israel
sbar@intuview.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

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Definitions of “radical” or “extremist” are relative to the mores and norms of the societies in which they exist. One definition for radical and extremist is: “one who advocates or resorts to measures that are counter to the norm” forces one to define the “norm”. Therefore, any discussion of counter-radicalization must focus on the common culture and collective narratives of the community in which the radical ideology exists.

Attempts to uncover “underlying causes” or “driving factors” of radicalization towards terrorism of **individuals** in Muslim communities tend to equate it with other forms of social violence in other societies. Indeed violence exists in all cultures; however, there are unique cultural and religious causes and dynamics that differentiate radicalization of Muslims from corresponding phenomena in other societies.

Radicalization of an individual tends to be incremental. One theory portrays a cycle of radicalization that consists of: (1) pre-radicalization, (2) self-identification, (3) indoctrination and (4) radicalization. A psychological explanation attributes radicalization to the quest for thrills, status, love, connection and comradeship.

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I will argue that the problem is not so much a response to the individual’s own sense of grievance but to the inconsistency between two world views in which he lives which are totally and diametrically opposed. The key drivers to radicalization in Muslim societies are therefore **collective** as opposed to individual— not an individual rebellious response to dissatisfaction in society by rejection of any authority, but rather a replacement of the “compromising” authority of parents, teachers and Imams with alternative— militant, uncompromising, and seemingly

pristinely Islamic authority. In this sense, the Muslim radical is, in fact, a conformist. The toolbox for countering Islamic radicalism, must therefore take this into account.

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2. HOW “RADICAL” IS “RADICAL ISLAM”

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The popular distinction between “radical Islam” and “moderate” or “mainstream” implies that the former constitutes a sort of heterodox sect and that there exists a clear border or firewall between the two: superiority in numbers and orthodox legitimacy of the latter. Since there is no doctrinal “firewall” between the mainstream and the radical and the underlying principles and doctrines that guide the latter are not viewed by the former as contradictory to Islam, it is more precise to view “radical” on a spectrum – most of which remains within the borders of acceptable orthodoxy. Consequently, radicals can evoke common religious narratives and beliefs and present logic that mainstream orthodox Muslims find difficult to refute, while the “mainstream” often suffers from a sense of inferiority towards their zealous co-religionists.

Like any wide spread ideological movement, the various radical Islamic trends can be viewed as a series of concentric circles, with the small “**hard core**” of activists at the center, surrounded by **active supporters** (and financiers), **potential allies**; and finally a mass passive but **sympathetic population**. The relative “width” of each band differs from one organization to another; the greater the legitimacy of the “hard core” in society, the “wider” the inner band is. In other cases, the outer circle is the “widest”.

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3. THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

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Islamist radicalization can be attributed, to a great extent, to a vacuum of modern secular or moderate religious leadership caused by a **crisis of religious and political legitimacy and authority**. Nationalism went bankrupt, while liberalism was repressed by authoritarian regimes and could not blossom in the absence of a strong middle class. The clerics no longer shared power with the rulers, but were called upon to support them, nevertheless. This resulted in a steady decline of the Sunni orthodox religious establishments and a rise in the role of extra-establishment clerics.

In the absence of legitimate political leaders who could outline the political interest, this “demand” began to be filled by the non-establishment *‘ulama*. This trend has resulted in the emergence of a “supermarket” of “scholars” who issue religious rulings and legitimize various ideologies. The age of information has also opened up a new venue for the Muslim to acquire religious instruction - including instruction regarding the duties of *jihad* - without having to come in direct contact with the Sheikh he or she is consulting with. Islamic establishments and regimes of the Middle East traded tolerance of *jihad* for local calm, and lost ground to radicals in their societies.

A relatively large portion of radical activists is “organizationally mobile”, absorbing new ideological components (often from the internet without even coming in contact with the “leaderships” who are spreading those ideas) and forming new local organizations. This tendency is compounded by the “Lone Ranger Syndrome”; the individual or small group which has absorbed the ideology and acts on it without any specific instructions.

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4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

A major social factor in the spread of Islamic radicalism is the **breakdown of traditional sources of social authority** in societies with a relatively young population. This is a source of both the power of attraction of radical ideologies for youth and the reaction of the Islamic establishment and conservative elements to what is perceived as the “Westernization” of the youth. The conflict between Islam and the West is, in essence, a clash of values. The West may be likened to the Sirens of the Odyssey – a dangerous “magnet”, which once succumbed to, will jeopardize core values of Islamic society – foremost among them, family values, the status of women and the authority of the elders.

Poverty and lack of economic horizons are frequently cited as major social sources of Islamic radicalism. These are, no doubt, causes of the attraction of Muslim youth to radical Islamic ideology. However, the spiritual, ideological, political and even military leaders of the radical Islamic movements tend to belong to the economic and social elites, though they derive popular support from the “masses”. This suggests that while **economic transformation** may be a necessary condition for the fight against Islamic radicalization, it is not a sufficient condition to uproot it.

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5. RADICALIZATION IN IMMIGRANT MUSLIM SOCIETIES

The relations between immigrant communities and their home countries also play a pivotal role in radicalization processes:

- Failure of Muslims in the “Diaspora” to **integrate/ assimilate/ develop a local identification** with their new homes creates an “identity-deficiency” that leaves the field open for the identification with an amorphous trans-national “virtual *Umma*” in lieu of the lost national identity of the countries of origin, on one hand, and that of the not-yet-accepted countries of residence on the other hand.
- Exposure to events in the home country (behavior of the regime towards the population) has a radicalizing effect on immigrants and weakens the development of a bond with particular local interests.
- Family relations – cases of Muslims in western countries being recruited by their relatives in the home countries during visits or facilitating immigration of radical relatives. The family based network of al-Qaeda is a case in point.
- In many immigrant communities the populace is connected to media from the

- home country more than to that of the host country.
- Settlement of large numbers of immigrants in neighborhoods or even cities in which they are the majority impedes assimilation and allows the community to continue to follow customs that are anathema to the host country (arranged marriages of minors, female circumcision etc.). The existence of such communities provides justification for demands for application of Shari'ah law in them.
 - The absence of Islamic schools in the host countries which integrate the host country's culture and mores forces the communities to import Imams and school books from the home countries and in doing so they import radical tendencies.

Two main models of relations between Western majority cultures and Muslim immigrants can be described: (a) the British form of declared pluralism and the Dutch concept of “integration” while maintaining ethnic differences and; (b) the paradigm (epitomized in France) of forced integration through uniformity of appearances and de-communalization of religion. Neither have established a balance between civil and ethnic identity or succeeded in mitigating the attraction of second generation Muslims in Europe to radical Islam.

Paradoxically, **globalization of ideas** in the Muslim world has not mitigated radicalism and may even have contributed to its rise. The second-generation immigrant, who lives in an immigrant community in the West, speaks the language of his former homeland and is exposed to information that binds him intimately to the grievances of that Mother Country. Furthermore, news, ideas and ideologies across countries and cultures and thus enabling a “cause célèbre” in one area to radicalize Muslims in remote parts of the world. Finally, free traffic of ideas facilitates the creation of a “virtual *Umma*” – in lieu of the lost national identity of the countries of origin, on one hand, and that of the not-yet-accepted countries of residence on the other hand.

Social legitimacy of terrorism gives rise to the legitimization of criminal elements in society. *Jihad* is a “criminality laundry”: it allows people who are anti-social and violent to give vent to these tendencies with impunity and under the “cover” of a legitimate (*jihad*) cause.

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6. THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

The Islamist political grievance towards the West is both a historic and current complaint; the West is taken to task, for what it did in the past, for what it is doing, and for what it is. The historic grievance relates to the history of the political relations between the two civilizations, beginning with the Muslim victory over Byzantium, followed by the Crusades, and culminating with colonialism, patronizing mandates, economic exploitation and the existence of Israel. This sense of historic grievance is compounded by contemporary events such as Afghanistan and Iraq. While the Israeli-Arab conflict is a popular battle cry for galvanizing radical Islamic groups, it seems that this issue was a marginal cause in the

emergence of Islamic movements and was treated by them as just another symptom of Western domination. The Palestinian issue is seen as a symptom of the Western conspiracy against the Muslims and not a leading cause.

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7. THE EFFICACY OF COUNTER-RADICALIZATION EFFORTS

Counter-radicalization efforts have been based on a number of approaches:

- **Moral arguments** - Efforts to denounce extremism on the basis that it contradicts universal principles such as freedom of religion, sanctity of civilian lives, etc.).
- **Community outreach** – examples of these are the UK “PREVENT” program.
- **Islamic de-radicalization programs** for “de-programing” of individual radicals. These programs are implemented with varied success in countries such as Yemen and Saudi Arabia.
- **Cultivation of liberal-reformist Muslim clerics and Sufi Islam** as a moderate counter-weight to radical Islam. This campaign is supported mainly by non-Muslims. The Sufi community by definition keeps its distance from political issues.
- **Importing of moderate Islamic mores** into the Arab-Muslim communities Islamic models from the moderate periphery – particularly Indonesia
- **Fighting fire with fire** – attempts to cultivate the non-violent but fundamentalist religious authorities (such as Yousuf Al-Qaradawi and the Muslim Brotherhood) as a counter-balance to the Jihadi-Salafi movements.

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7.1. Moral Arguments

The moral argument against radical Islamic ideology is usually based on western morality. The message is based on the assumption that there are universal values, which all religions inherently subscribe to (“the Golden Rule, inviolability of innocents – particularly women, children and the elderly) and hence the counter message to Islamic radicalization must come from those principles. This assumption however is simplistic and ineffective. Islam – unlike Judeo-Christian traditions rejects that the human being has an innate capacity to discern between good and evil. According to traditional Islamic belief, since God did not give the individual that capacity, He does not judge him for his actions but only for his "intentions" to serve God and do His will. Hence, Islamic culture relies heavily on obedience to authority for moral guidance based on exegesis from canonic sources or precedents.

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7.2. Islamic de-radicalization programs

De-radicalization programs have been developed in a number of Muslim countries – notably Saudi Arabia and Yemen. However the high level of announced recidivism (about 20% in the Saudi program) raises questions regarding the efficacy

of the program and warrants a deeper look at its content. The weakness of the “de-radicalization” campaigns in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States is that it is not the very legitimacy of waging *jihad*, which mainstream scholars oppose, but the application of the principle of *jihad* to present circumstances and the specific means used for fighting *jihad* in the cases under discussion.

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7.3. Cultivation of Liberal and Sufi Islam

Since 9/11 there have been efforts to promote liberal or Sufi Islam as a counter-balance to the radical narrative. These efforts have also met with limited success, as these streams remain out of the mainstream of Islamic orthodoxy and certainly hard line Wahhabi and Salafi schools – that are the breeding ground of radicalization and of the Jihadi movement. Alongside the voices of the radicals there exists a relatively small number of Islamic scholars who call for reform of one sort or another in Islam and updating Islam or reconciling it with the West. These trends however remain a minority and are persecuted for their positions by the Islamic establishment. Therefore, the likelihood of an Islamic *Kulturkampf* over the relations with the non-Muslim world seems low.

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7.4. Importing ideas from the periphery

Probably the paradigm of moderate Islam in South-East Asia is Indonesia. The Indonesian case seems to disprove the argument that a critical mass of social troubles in a Muslim country will automatically bring about popular support for the radical Islamic solution. Radical Islam has failed to capture the imagination of the majority of Indonesian Muslims. This has generated much speculation regarding the possibility of “grafting” Indonesian Islamic concepts onto Islam in the Middle East and the West, as a means to counter radicalization. However, these efforts have invariably failed.

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8. CONCLUSIONS

Counter-radicalization efforts have been severely handicapped by political correctness and an ideologically motivated search for a “Theory Of Everything” that could serve as an explanation of terrorism in general, without reference to the religious and cultural breeding ground from whence it stems. This approach, I believe is fruitless. A practical approach to countering Islamic terrorism (or terrorism by Muslims performed by them in the name of Islam) must accept that the real motivation is Islam, as those terrorists perceive it. It must also accept that the problem is not “violent extremism” but any ideological worldview that justifies violence against innocents in society – whether the ideology is in a stage of latency or breakout.

Countering Islamic radicalism cannot be done either by turning a blind eye to its religious origins or by relying solely on political, economic or military means. The

need to make use of religious tools though seems both foreign to Western strategic thought and futile. The “religious” arsenal available to the West is limited. The attempts to deny the historic validity of militant Islamic traditions by reformist re-interpretation of Islam and revisionist reading of Islamic history will never gain sufficient credence in the Muslim world to undermine the traditional reading of Islam.

Since authority plays such a pivotal role in radicalization, it is imperative to deal with radical clerics with ties in the West. It must be a clear “line in the sand” between legitimate religious beliefs and those that will not be countenanced, notwithstanding their roots in religious doctrines. This implies legal steps against clerics who declare even conditional or post factum support of acts of terrorism.