

Part 1: Historical and Ideological origins of violent extremism in Islam

This section will explore ideological orientations of Islam that have been attributed to violent extremism in the contemporary era. The research conducted throughout will confirm whether characteristics emerge to form a mosaic that is specific to violent extremism. Research findings can then be discussed in light of emerging themes to determine the extent, if any, that violent extremism is influenced by ideological drivers. The rationale for focusing on this area is due to the preponderance of academic literature that merely acknowledges historical and ideological delineations of extremism in relation to the contemporary phenomenon while failing to address the significance of this influence among extremist entities today. To ignore these influences, which are considered significant indicators for the emergence of divergent movements in the annals of history and indeed, how they were countered societally, is to overlook potential remedies to a phenomenon considered relatively new in the West, yet primeval from an Eastern perspective. Presumptions that former Arab/Muslim experiences are either alien to that of Western researchers' encounters with contemporary violent extremism suggests academic snobbery that only serves to perpetuate an existing vacuum between practitioners possessing the requisite historical knowledge and context to address many of the challenges of violent extremism today, and statutory bodies, the latter being transient to research provided by the former, opting for such findings that are in accord with their preferred political narrative.

The section will also illustrate the extent of Muslim practitioner experiences and in doing so, emphasise the importance of understanding contemporary violent extremism in context of historical and ideological delineations.

Reclaiming the language: Defining the correct Islamic terminology

It is necessary at this stage to address various terminologies used to define religious extremism cited in the name of Islam. Terminology that refers to Jihad and *Jihadis*¹ as violent extremist concepts are examples of often misunderstood and misused phraseology that serve to further obfuscate existing discourse around what actually constitutes extremism. In fact, as this chapter also aims to highlight, some of the most effective counter-terrorist arguments and strategies emanate from groups that continue to be incorrectly conflated with violent extremism.² Indeed, the:

¹ It is important to note some researchers acknowledge the negative reference to Jihad. The CTC's observations go some way to explaining why this noble Islamic term is cited to designate violent extreme movements: "We recognise that the use of "Jihadi"...is controversial. Some analysts feel that it cedes too much to militant Salafis to ratify their use of the term – they call their movement al-haraka al-jihadiyya ("the Jihadi Movement") – since jihad has positive connotations in Islam. However, we have opted to use it for the following reasons. First, it has wide currency in the Western counterterrorism community. Second, the proposed alternatives are either too imprecise or polemically charged to be analytically useful. Third, "Jihadism" indicates the centrality of religious warfare in militant Salafi worldview. Fourth, using the label makes Jihadis accountable for giving the term a bad name and for not living up to the high standard of conduct associated with Jihad. Finally, the term is used in Arab media and was coined by a devout Saudi Muslim who is hostile to the ideology, so it is not a Western neologism." McCants W, Brachman, J and Felter, J: 'Militant Ideology Atlas' Executive Report, November 2006, p.5 Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy.

² Lambert, R. 'Salafi and Islamist Londoners: Stigmatised minority faith communities countering al-Qaida' Crime Law Soc. Change (2008) 50:73-89

“...lazy parlance in which the words ‘extremist’ and ‘radical’ have become interchangeable has meant that any Muslim expressing anything other than unremitting support for the government is under suspicion.”³

Increasing acknowledgement is being given to the fact that academic and political debate need to examine and redefine some of the terminology attributed to violent radicalisation and extremism. The conclusive seminar report of a conference hosted by Aberystwyth University in October 2007 highlighted the consensus reached by participants that:

“The current language and discourse surrounding the term ‘radicalisation’ is highly problematic, in large part because; i. it assumes simplistic and mono-causal explanations for political violence based on notions of brainwashing, extremist ‘infection’ or radicalisation ‘pathways’ or ‘escalators’, ii. it constructs everyday Muslim practices, Islamically-inspired political activism and the broader Muslim community as inherently ‘suspect’, iii. it restricts the scope of legitimate debate about foreign policy and divisive political domestic issues; and iv. it is highly counter-productive, inconsistent and highly negative in terms of government goals of preventing further terrorist violence.”⁴

Amongst the recommendations of the report was the need to challenge the inaccurate and unreflective use of such language as well as critiquing terms such as terrorism, radicalisation and extremism.⁵ In concurrence with these recommendations, this chapter will examine the misuse of religious terminology related to radicalisation, extremism and Jihad etc. with reference to legislative (Shariah based) classifications that are commonly understood in the Muslim world. Parallel examination of these terminologies with western academic perspectives should illustrate whether significant disparities exist in the understanding and subsequent approach in addressing the challenge of violent extremism. This section will also examine the emergence of violent extremism from a historical perspective as a means of comparison with its contemporary counterpart today. While discussing *forms* of religious extremism later in the section, specific focus will also be given to the emergence of ideological extremism and the subsequent manifestations that emanated from an extreme i.e. Kharijite interpretation of Islam. An ensuing discussion on Salafism will follow to determine whether it is in fact an ideology that serves as a precursor to violent extremism. Particular attention will be paid to areas of ideological and methodological divergence between Salafism and Kharijism. Wiktorowicz’s⁶ typology of Salafis will finally be reviewed against the conclusions drawn from this chapter.

³ Briggs, R. Fieschi, C. Lownsbrough, H: ‘Bringing it Home: Community-based approaches to counter-terrorism,’ DEMOS, 2006, pp.41-42.

⁴ Seminar Report, Aberystwyth University, Department of Politics, Centre For The Study of ‘Radicalisation’ & Contemporary Political Violence: ‘The Politics Of Radicalisation: Reclaiming The Debate And Reclaiming The Language’ p.1, 18th October 2007.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Wiktorowicz, Q: ‘Anatomy of the Salafi Movement: Studies in Conflict & Terrorism’ Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 29: 207- 239, 2006

Categorisation of Islamic terminology on extremism.

Introducing and describing Islamic legislative terminology is necessary at this stage in order to identify and, subsequently, contextualise various interpretations of extremism that are to be discussed in this chapter. The potential for misunderstanding the religious terminology used throughout this book is then, hopefully, diminished. Al-Mutairi, in his comprehensive discourse on religious extremism, classifies extremism according to religious legislative lexicology.⁷ He makes an important observation that should not be ignored by western academia, which has often attempted to develop theories on religious extremism in Islam from an isolated platform detached from Muslim scholarly and historical input. He asserts that Shariah (Islamic Legislative) expressions and terminology are essential if we are to properly understand violent extremism and terrorism enacted in the name of Islam.⁸ Despite religious extremism not being a new phenomenon in the Arab and Muslim world, as will be seen when discussing the historical roots of ideological extremism, western academia has either largely ignored or indeed, failed to access existing experiences, knowledge and expertise from the former. Al-Mutairi supports his observation regarding the importance of referencing Shariah law in this particular field by citing the famous and controversial classical scholar and jurist, Ibn Taimiyyah:

“Knowing Arabic...helps in understanding the meaning... Similarly, understanding the manner in which the words express their meanings [is also very helpful and important]. Most of the misguidance of the heretics was due to this reason. They interpreted...words according to what they claimed such words indicated, while in reality, the matter was not so.”⁹

Quranic and prophetic injunctions also illustrate Islam’s position on extremism:

“Oh people of the Book (referring to the Jewish and Christian faiths), do not go to extremes in your religion.”¹⁰

And:

“All of you beware of extremism in the religion, for those before you were only destroyed because of religious extremism.”¹¹

⁷ Al- Mutairi, Dr. A R M L: ‘Religious Extremism in the Lives of Contemporary Muslims’ translated by Zarabozo, J M M, Basheer Company for Publications and Translations, 2001,

⁸ Ibid, pps.56-63

⁹ Ibid, p.60 citing Taimiyyah, I: ‘Al-Fataawa’ vol.7, p.115

¹⁰ The Quran, Surah: al-Nisa’ 4: 171 (Chapter: The Women, 4 verse 171), English Rendition

¹¹ Recorded by al-Nasai (hadeeth collection number 3057) and Ibn Majah, (hadeeth collection number 3029) as authenticated by Shaykh Naasirudeen Al Albani in ‘Sahih Sunan Ibn Majah’ (hadeeth collection number 2455).

Categories of extremism (Lexical meanings)

- i. **Al-Ghulu (Extremism).** This can also be described as excessiveness, i.e. a person going beyond the limits in any given matter. Shaykh Salih Ali-Shaykh explains 'Extremism means to go beyond the permissible limits in any issue. So, anyone who goes beyond the limits of the Sunnah, he is guilty of extremism.'¹²

Lane defines this term as: '*He, or it, exceeded the proper due or common limit; was excessive, immoderate, or beyond measure...He acted or behaved, with forced hardness, or strictness, or rigor, in religion, so that he exceeded the proper, due or common limit.*'¹³

Another definition suggests '*Extremism in the religion is going beyond the limits Allah established, expanding on the domains of the religion and that are demarcated by those limits.*'¹⁴

- ii. **Al-Tatarruf (Radicalism).** Linguistically, the Arabic derivation of the word refers primarily to boundaries or parameters that are established or set, i.e. '*the utmost edge or limit of something or 'he went beyond the limits of justice and was not moderate.*'¹⁵ Its legislative connotation refers to someone who pushes these boundaries but *not* exceeding *them*.

- iii. **Al-Tanatta' (exorbitance or extravagance).** This category is clear and refers to exorbitance etc. whether it emanates from speech or action.

- iv. **Al-Tashaddud (strength, rigidity and inflexibility).** This type of extremism relates to overcoming or overpowering something / someone by being forceful and inflexible. The prophetic narration confirms this in the following explanation:

*'No one overburdens himself in the religion except that it overcomes him (and he will not be able to continue in that manner).'*¹⁶

- v. **Al-Unf (harshness, sternness or meanness).** As in the case of Al-Tanatta (iii) the meaning of this is clear.

Al-Mutairi's conclusive summary of these terms highlight the similarities between the linguistic definitions of at least two of the words (*Al-Ghulu* and *Al-*

¹² Ali-Shaykh, S A A: 'The Fitnah of the Khawarij', p.10 http://www.answering-extremism.com/trans-pub/ae_sas_3.pdf

¹³ Lane, E: 'Arabic-English Lexicon' The Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, England, 1984, vol.2, p.2287

¹⁴ Al-Meedani, A R; 'Basaa'ir li-l-Muslim al Musaair, p.228 cited in Al- Mutairi, Dr. A R M L: 'Religious Extremism in the Lives of Contemporary Muslims' translated by Zarabozo, J M M, Basheer Company for Publications and Translations, 2001, p.150.

¹⁵ Al- Mutairi, Dr. A R M L: 'Religious Extremism in the Lives of Contemporary Muslims' translated by Zarabozo, J M M, Basheer Company for Publications and Translations, 2001, p.65

¹⁶ Al-Bukhari, M I: 'Al-Jaami al-Saheeh' Daar Ihyaa al-Turaath al-Arabi, Beirut

Tatarruf), while at the same time explaining the particular differences in their meanings to be ones of generality, i.e. *Al-Tatarruf* (reaching an extreme or limit of something as has been described above), and specificity, i.e. *Al-Ghulu*. The remaining categories are simply manifestations or 'expressions' of *Al-Ghulu*, this being the most serious and severe classification of extremism in this instance:

*"The extremist is characterized by taking to his religion in a very strict and severe manner (Al-Tashaddud). He is also characterized, in his relations with others, by harshness and incivility, (Al-Unf). He is also characterized by going deeply and beyond the needed limit when it comes to actions of the religion. All of these words, save Al-Tatarruf, have been mentioned in the texts of the Shari'ah."*¹⁷

Al Mutairi then discusses religious tenets that expound upon the moderate and balanced methodology of Islam, providing Quranic references and prophetic exhortations.¹⁸

¹⁷ Al- Mutairi, Dr. A R M L: 'Religious Extremism in the Lives of Contemporary Muslims' translated by Zarabozo, J M M, Basheer Company for Publications and Translations, 2001, p.67

¹⁸ Ibid, pps. 67-74