DERADICALIZATION THROUGH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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 Violence is a phenomenon that is present in all societies, whether at the individual or public level, and for a variety of motivations that range from the personal and psychological to the social, political, ideological and economic. The potential for violence exists within every individual, but can either be weakened through educational, social and cultural processes that elevate individuals to higher values and standards for resolving tensions and conflicts, or strengthened by educational, social and cultural processes that further fuel conflict and violence.

While the world’s leaders focus on combatting the tide of violent extremism through heightened security and military acts, it can be argued that far less attention has been paid to deradicalization or reintegration of the young people who constitute the largest and most susceptible pool for recruitment.

As illustrated by the introduction to this handbook (see Chapter 1), there are various approaches to deradicalization and disengagement, some focusing on deradicalization as preventing violent actions, some on deradicalization as changing ideas.

Following the latter view, deradicalization requires the confrontation of the misguided ideas of extremist and terrorist groups head on. In the case of violent extremist groups of a religious background, which is the focus of this chapter, these ideas must be challenged on two levels – contesting the textual basis of their interpretations of their religion and challenging their historical basis, to show that these interpretations have little precedent these interpretations are not supported by strong historical and textual evidence. If violent extremists use religion to justify their actions, religious leaders have the capacity to challenge and debunk their arguments, thus weakening their narrative. The vast majority of studies conducted on the educational background of terrorists who use religious arguments show that an extremely small percentage has received any form of formal religious instruction. The vast majority are largely ignorant of religious principles or texts. Among the most noteworthy of these studies are those conducted by Britain’s Intelligence Agency MI5 in 2008 (Travis 2008) and Andrew Lebovich in 2016, which conclude that religious literacy is low among the predominantly young Muslim men who have travelled internationally to join violent extremist organizations (VEOs) such as Daesh and others. These two studies undermine the widespread notion that these
terrorists are fundamentally driven by a deep-seated understanding and practice of Islam. Rather, we find that these individuals had barely engaged with the Muslim faith prior to their recruitment into VEOs, and that VEOs are able to exploit their ignorance of religious precepts to persuade them that violent acts are a religious duty. This leads us to the conclusion that a concerted effort to fill the void in religious literacy and counter extremist religious interpretations and misrepresentations of religious precepts might go a long way towards strengthening counterterrorism and deradicalization efforts. As expressed by Oliver Roy (2006), it is also “new intellectuals” – individuals with little formal education – who spearheaded the development of, for example, Al Qaeda and later the Islamic State; these ideologies are “invention” rather than tradition. Religious foundations have been stated to be important for deradicalization and disengagement work. Indeed, the relatively young term “deradicalization” began to emerge through Middle Eastern countries’ attempts to use theological debates in order to convince prisoners to abandon militant extremist ideology. In one sense, moderate theologians can develop alternative narratives to those of the violent extremists.

One of the reasons behind the appeal of extremist narratives – whether xenophobic, nationalistic or religious – is how they simplify the complex. Reality is complex, as are religious texts and how people view, interpret and live by them. Extremism presents a seductively simplified version of reality and of religion that strips out all the complexity and relativity of lived experience. It is no coincidence that this narrative tends not to appeal to many social science graduates, for instance, whose education focuses on the complexity and relativity of the human experience. These simplistic narratives are thriving today, driven by the spread of social media, which itself simplifies reality by reducing it to a Facebook status or a 140-character tweet.

Counter-narrative work is growing in importance with regard to deradicalization; introducing religious and ideological narratives that counter the narratives of the violent extremism might be a tool to produce such counter-narratives. Braddock and Horgan (2016) and Kahn (2017) show that psychological research has argued that psychological transportation – “a process whereby all mental systems and capacities are focused on events in a narrative” increases the reception likelihood of a narrative, and that perceived relationships between consumers of narratives and the characters contained in the narrative encourage trust, and such characters might indeed be religious. The source of the narrative has to be trusted, and religious institutions, such as Al-Zaytouna, might contribute to trust, as it has a more than millennium-long tradition in interpreting Islam. Braddock and Morrison (2018) highlight the importance of who is seen as being behind the counter-narrative, as crucial for the acceptance of the narrative. The counter-narrative has to come from a source that has some form of credibility in the eyes of the violent extremist, in order to be more efficient. If the radical narrative is claiming to be religious, religious leaders, in some form, or denomination can have access to forms of such trust.

The irony is perhaps that scholars such as Braddock and Morrison (2018) highlight the importance of the Internet in such quests, a medium many religious leaders still have to develop skills in using.

Religious counter-narratives also must be simplified if they are to reach the target audience. This means efforts must be made to simplify complex concepts and convey them in accessible ways through popular channels. This is a task that requires multiple actors – religious institutions and scholars, intellectuals, social scientists and psychologists, educators as well as community leaders. There is no shortage of research or scholarly writings relating to questions of religion, but these must be actively and effectively disseminated through
a concerted and comprehensive campaign that uses multiple channels of communication and education to engage young people. We must reform our public education systems in a manner that reflects a diversity of opinions and approaches, and our curricula must integrate both a greater and more profound appreciation of history and civilization with an openness to all the best the world has to offer. We must equip our religious leaders and psychological experts to meet the changing demands of our youth who feel alienated and excluded in many ways, by organizing lectures and teach-ins where they can make direct contact with young people and speak to their concerns and anxieties. We must also develop multi-media productions, through television, radio and print, that synthesize and incorporate the values of citizenship and democratic practice without seeming condescending or presumptuous.

This chapter will present my own thoughts on these issues, the thoughts of as a practitioner and Islamic thinker rather than an outright academic expert on deradicalization and disengagement.

**A religious approach to deradicalization and disengagement**

A religious approach does have some advantages, including speaking to violent extremist individuals from a platform that some of them might see creating common ground, and addressing extremist brainwashing that might have taken place inside a radical organization.

In that vein, it is important to keep in mind that the religious sphere of interpretation is a broad space comprising widely varying views, interpretations, schools and sects. In fact, the deeper and more detailed an individual’s religious education, the more developed is that person’s understanding that very few matters in religion – or life – are black and white. There are widely varying views and shades of grey in interpreting any issue, a matter that has been respected by religious scholars throughout Islamic history.

The first element of such a deradicalization approach must be to work with religious leaders and educators who enjoy widespread recognition, credibility and respect among young people. A key element of this process is to build trust, which requires credibility. Just as there are charismatic preachers responsible for terrorist recruitment, we must work with the many more inspiring and compelling religious figures around the world who are trusted by their local communities, who understand the concerns and anxieties of young people and who can speak in their language. This is a long-term, grassroots effort that requires time and patience, neither of which is in large supply in the fast-moving world of politics, but which are nevertheless vital in effectively addressing this phenomenon. Such trust will allow interventions amongst radicalized individuals as well; the radicalized will share a foundation that can be an opening for deradicalization work.

A second part of the solution is to integrate respected historic religious institutions. Mainstream institutions such as Al-Zaytouna in Tunis and Al-Azhar in Egypt and imam training institutes throughout the world need to be strengthened in order to play an effective role in producing mainstream religious leaders who have a deep knowledge of religious texts and thought, and an appreciation of how the concepts of freedom, individual rights and pluralism have been developed through centuries of Islamic reformist thought. Again, the solution would continue to create trust; institutions with experience and credibility might use this to create openings in the radicalized; challenge extremist narratives and engage with those who have been exposed to them.
Key concepts from the Qur’an: breaking the radical narrative

In this section, I will put forward the basis for a religious counter-discourse to the arguments used by violent extremism groups that claim to base their actions on Islam. Such groups adopt a very selective interpretation of *jihad* to justify the use of violence, whereas the term in Arabic and in Islamic jurisprudence denotes “struggle” or exertion, and ranges from personal spiritual self-purification through to the use of force in very specific circumstances subject to clear conditions. These groups justify their use of *jihad* on one of two broad grounds – either as a means of forcing non-Muslims to become Muslims (i.e. through individual conversion) or as a means of destroying all so-called non-Islamic structures and systems so that Islamic law becomes universal and societies are placed under their version of Islamic governance. They interpret some verses of the Qur’an so as to justify this position, arguing that *jihad* is an offensive weapon inherently designed to confront disbelief, or *kufr*.1

By doing so, these groups violate nearly every single accepted norm of textual and historical interpretation and venture far beyond anything that resembles classical, traditional or mainstream Islam.

There is a clear, compelling and textually sound response to this argument that has long constituted the mainstream opinion in Islam held by the majority of scholars. If we look at all the verses of the Qur’an holistically, it becomes clear that the holy text emphasizes the idea that God created mankind with a distinguishing feature from other forms of creation – freedom of choice. The Qur’an makes clear that, had God so wished, He could have created all of mankind in the same mould, with the same beliefs, culture, language and so on. God says in the Qur’an, “Had God willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good” (Verse 5:48), and in another verse:

Had your Lord so willed, He would surely have made mankind one community. But they will not cease to differ among themselves except for those on whom your Lord has mercy. And it is for this [exercise of freedom of choice] that He has created them.

*(Verses 11:118–119)*

The Qur’an stresses that God chose diversity to be a fundamental characteristic of the human race, manifested in multiple racial, ethnic and religious groups, and endowed humans with the freedom to choose their values and belief systems. Thus, Islam recognizes and affirms that pluralism and diversity were intended to be universal and natural laws of the human species that cannot be subverted or obliterated by any individual or group. Any attempt to do so would, from the Qur’anic perspective, go against the very nature of creation. Hence, God says in the Qur’an, “There shall be no compulsion in religion” (Verse 2:256). To seek to dominate people’s hearts and dictate their beliefs directly and categorically violates this basic commandment of all Muslims. Indeed, this is the case of most world religions. We can give some examples from Islam.

Readings of Islamic history

These interpretations must also be confronted using Islamic history. As a matter of historical fact, the *Khilafah*, Caliphate or Islamic state recognized diversity, both externally and internally. Externally, it recognized non-Muslim states and carried out regular diplomatic and trade
relations with them. Successive caliphates sent ambassadors to non-Muslim lands and in turn received ambassadors from them. If Islam had required that Muslims impose Islamic governance everywhere and viewed all forms of non-Muslim governance as illegitimate, such relations certainly could not have existed.

Internally, another constant feature of Islamic history that belies the extremist narrative is the fact of pluralism. Muslim-majority societies across the world have for centuries contained non-Muslim minorities. Indeed, Islamic rule has recognized religious, intellectual and even legal pluralism throughout its history. Religious minorities could conduct their personal affairs according to their own religious law and had their own religious institutions and courts. Within Sunni Islam, each of the main four schools of thought had its own religious scholars, muftis and courts. In fact, the history of Islamic governance is full of examples of the coexistence of diverse religious communities and their laws and practices being respected and protected by the main political authorities. This model of multiple legal structures and codes coexisting in the same state may seem unfathomable today in light of the modern nation-state with its centralized legal system, but it went a long way to protecting religious pluralism for centuries. In Tunisia, for example, while the Ottoman-era ruling dynasty largely adhered to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, there were Hanafi and Maliki courts as well as Jewish courts for the sizeable Jewish community in the country.

This practice goes back to the first Muslim society established by the Prophet Muhammad, which was in its essence a pluralistic society. The society of Medina was composed of Muslims of different ethnic and tribal origins as well as non-Muslims. In the founding document of the Medinan system, the Sahifa – its constitution – we find that the first Muslim society ever established recognized non-Muslims as equal and integral parts of the ummah, or community. The Sahifa stated, “Jews are one community (ummah) with the believers”. While Jews in Medina were part of this community, Muslims from outside Medina were not. Thus, if a Jewish member of Medinan society was attacked by an outsider from another state, the Sahifa obliged members of the community to protect him or her, while the same rights and obligations did not extend to Muslims outside Medina. This shows that, from the Islamic perspective, the political community is based on territory and not religious belonging. This is the basis for what we today call “citizenship”, and what I believe ought to be developed as the basis for equal rights and democracy in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Many elements of Islamic history – in particular, the diversity of Muslim societies throughout history – are erased by the extremist narrative. Thus, an important strategy within deradicalization efforts is to challenge the religious arguments deployed within extremist narratives by showing that they have little basis in Islamic texts or in Islamic history. A methodological dismantling of these arguments is essential in order to persuade those attracted to it that they have, in fact, been led astray by charlatans posing as religious authorities who are presenting a misleading religious narrative.

It is essential to put these facts before individuals who hold extremist views and to push them to question the narrative they have embraced by asking critical questions – Why is it that Muslim societies have always been plural? Why did the Prophet Muhammad include Jews and other non-Muslims as members of the first Muslim society and guarantee their protection if pluralism is not accepted in Islam? Why is it that the oldest churches and synagogues in the world are, to this day, in Muslim countries? If Islam did not respect and protect pluralism and ensure the continued survival of these minorities and their places of worship, groups such as ISIS would not have found minorities to persecute nor churches and temples to destroy in the first place.
The central role of religious institutions

Religious institutions doubtless have an important role to play in challenging extremist religious discourse. In fact, throughout Islamic history, when social or political conditions gave rise to the emergence of extremist interpretation, groups, religious institutions and scholars played a key role in rebutting the arguments of these groups and protecting mainstream religious thought against the attacks of extremist factions.

However, religious institutions in the Arab world today are no longer able to fulfill that function as effectively as they once did, due to many factors. In many Arab countries, religious institutions have seen their independence constrained by authoritarian regimes, which have sought to either marginalize these institutions or exploit them for their own interests. In Tunisia, for example, decades of authoritarian policies aimed at weakening and controlling religious institutions mean that they have lost their capacity to produce credible religious leaders and a religious discourse that is able to relate to the developments and needs of modern life. The resultant religious vacuum that has been created has been filled, frequently, by self-appointed religious figures with little religious training or by religious discourse on satellite television channels based overseas and social media promoting extreme interpretations of Islam.

Challenging and undermining extremist narratives requires filling the religious vacuum that is being exploited by extremist voices to promote their interpretations. This calls for strengthening mainstream religious institutions and improving training and support to religious leaders.

Imams, through their weekly sermons at Friday prayer services and other religious services throughout the week, are the most prominent conduit of religious thought and understanding in local communities throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds. Indeed, it is to their local imams that many observant Muslims primarily look for guidance and direction in religious matters. In Tunisia, for example, each of the 5,300 mosques in the country receives on average 1,500 persons in Friday prayer services, the largest weekly congregation, making it an optimal platform for promoting a compelling and tolerant religious vision and combatting extremist ideologies among a broad and religiously observant audience. In such a context, in a population of roughly 11 million people, the impact of imam training would be far reaching.

It is therefore imperative that comprehensive training initiatives for imams constitute a pillar of any deradicalization effort. At present, this critical group are largely undertrained, underpaid and overlooked as critical vectors for delivering counter-narratives. Imams in Tunisia, for example, are paid the equivalent of roughly $100 per month and receive little training. The vast majority do not have any higher education. Many young people complain that their sermons are repetitive and uninspiring, which is not surprising since they tend to avoid touching on important social topics that concern young people. Without adequately trained imams, and when young people find nowhere to turn to for compelling and inspiring religious teaching within formal state institutions, they become susceptible to fringe voices that speak directly to their concerns and fears. Equipping imams and religious scholars with a simple yet compelling religious discourse based on the concept of citizenship and training that promote the values of freedom and pluralism by drawing on Islamic history and texts would directly challenge extremist narratives.

Conclusion

Some may question the role of religion in countering violent extremism, preferring models of hard-line secularism that believe the key to peace and social harmony is to erase religion
from the public sphere. However, this approach has been shown to yield further extremism and fuel conflict and polarization. The answer to deradicalization is therefore not less religion, but to collectively rethink and reform our understanding of religion and strengthen the efforts and voices of religious scholars and leaders who are best able to counter violent extremist discourse that misuses religious terms in order to promote the narrow interests and thirst for power of a tiny minority at the expense of the vast majority of peaceful Muslims.

What I have outlined above is in no way a small endeavour, and is only one part of an overarching set of measures and reforms needed to address the rise of violent extremism. The phenomenon of violent extremism in any society indicates the presence of a deep crisis on some level—whether economic, social, political, intellectual or moral. The crises facing the world, and in particular the Arab world, as evidenced by the explosion of social unrest in 2011, require immediate, medium-term and long-term considered solutions that seek to address the roots of these crises, rather than attacking only the symptoms. This chapter is an attempt to elaborate one solution, among many, to address this crisis on a religious and intellectual level.

Note
1 According to the consensus (ijma') of Islamic scholars throughout history, armed jihad is permitted only in defence against direct attack, and is considered the weakest form of jihad from an Islamic perspective. In its broadest and most widely used sense, jihad is a deeply spiritual, often internal struggle to improve oneself and thereby reaffirm one’s commitment to goodness and God consciousness.

References