

The Global Characteristics of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

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Defining the Starting Points

There are a number of ways to explain patterns of global Islamic political radicalism, but few have looked at the interconnected geopolitical dynamics underpinning global societies in an economic and sociological context.

In the first instance, a few fundamental matters need to be stated. Considerable inequality exists in the Middle East, some of which is a result of the legacy of the colonial experience and the inability of independent regimes to deliver on their promises of development, democracy and open societies. Western political, economic and military policy decisions based on short-term interests further exacerbate this dynamic. It leads to resentment on the part of the most affected communities, combined with disdain and disconnection on the part of elites in the Middle East and across the world more generally.

The spread of Islamic political radicalism originates from three sources. One is the emergence of contemporary Wahhabism, fuelled by ideology backed up by significant levels of funding. It influences vast swathes of the Middle East as well as Muslims in the diaspora. The second strand originates from the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood, with this especially affecting Egypt and neighbouring countries. The third concerns Jamaat-e-Islami groups that spread from South Asia to South East Asia. All three share many concerns and ambitions, although particular political and ideological differences invariably separate them.

This submission concentrates on specific concerns emanating from the MENA region, including the impact of the emergence of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL and Daesh). What is pernicious about this particular situation is the lack of attention it gets from Western powers that benefit from Gulf oil and various military, security and defence opportunities. It has left specific Gulf States unencumbered in promoting a destructive perspective on Islam. Inside their own territories, Gulf States elites have minimal interest in encouraging wider society to ask critical questions, preferring to curb dissent towards the Wahhabi ideology, which is presented wholesale to the wider population. Ironically,

disaffected youth outside of the country use the language of Wahhabism as a form of resistance against Saudi Arabia.

With over 25m Muslim minorities in Western Europe and approximately 5m in the US, these groups migrated in the post-war period, and settled and adapted to society, all the while generally making valuable contributions as active citizens participating in institutions. However, in the sphere of neoliberal societies, large numbers of racialised and marginalised Muslim minority groups prevail. They variously face the brunt of exclusion and enmity from members of society. Several political elites rest the blame for all the woes of societies on these most 'othered' of others. Because of these processes, a few enter into theatres of war in the Middle East because of anger, revenge, status or merely the search for thrills. This has continued since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, all the way until the current period, culminating in the rise of the Islamic State. Where Islam does enter the picture, aspects of Wahhabism project a black-and-white worldview subsequently absorbed by young people at the margins of society. Recruiters from outside the community are not always involved, a theory regularly propounded in the early stages of thinking through questions of radicalisation concerning young men. Rather, the mechanisms emerge virtually and because of local area issues, where a projection in relation to a global identity emerges in the light of contemporary politics affecting the local.

The reasons why a few thousand European born Muslim men went to the ranks of the Islamic State is to do with pull factors defined by a radical perspective, which is Islamised ideologically and politically during later stages in the path towards violent extremism. Many Islamic State foreign fighters consist of Saudis, Tunisians, Libyans and even Turks. The push factors are to do with failed integration policy, where the 'left behind' in current European societies consist of many young ethnic minorities facing all the forms of exclusion that their white counterparts face but also racism and discrimination on the basis of colour and religion. Blaming all of these outcomes on Islam is a disingenuous view that perpetuates the status quo, legitimising the legacy of racism and Orientalism. It silences all criticism among Muslims by perpetuating the notion that a direct, steadfast route takes troubled individuals with deeply held conservative Islamic views all the way to violent extremism.

Thus, the existence of Islamic State has come about because the West has been friendly to Middle Eastern oil while marginalising minorities at home. Moreover, this radicalising force is unleashed within pluralistic Muslim societies, galvanising resistance against the West (which ought to be against their own leadership but they are immobilised due to no democracy in practice). In the West, racism and class structure suppresses Muslim minorities, where excluded, racialised and radicalised young Muslim men accept the black-white right-wrong rhetoric because their own societies have essentially rejected them, leading them to war-torn places like Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq and now Syria. As Western bombs drop on these parts of the world, and as other bombs are on their way to the Gulf Arabs, the more this whole cycle will go on. Communities can do only so much on the ground if elites are only interested in reproducing the status quo and perpetuating the culture of violence that

characterises our epoch. Critical engagement with the Gulf, while eliminating racism and structural disadvantage at home, are clearly important ways forward.

In terms of defeating Islamic State, the current major foe facing the Muslim world and the West, it is necessary to remove its opportunities. The Islamic State takes advantage of breaks in societies that stem from social and political division combined with economic insecurities. The effects of late capitalism and the digital age have created much of this. Citizens in the West and in the Middle East experience anxiety at the national level and then internalise it at the individual level, causing dissonance and disaffection. Young men who face extreme alienation and exclusion are easily seduced by seemingly totalising solutions presented in the most black-and-white of terms. By re-conceptualising how people regard their opportunities in life, where hope and opportunity can replace fear and discord, Islamic State has less to capitalise on. This aspect is about breaking down the anxiety for all groups in society, but especially among the young, where a particular heightening of fear and despair, perpetuated by the age of terror, endures. Second, while global human populations are highly connected digitally, ironically, great physical and material fissures exist in societies, leading to disconnect and conflict in the current climate. The technology that leads to humans to be better connect with each other can also be used to create profound cleavages that capitalise on enduring social and political conflicts.

Contextualising the Middle East

In 1852 Marx wrote that history repeats itself, first as a tragedy, then as a farce. Today's conflicts occur for many reasons. First, geopolitical factors form the overriding dynamic, which are not specifically ethnic or cultural. Second, the sectarian dimension reflects an internal quagmire facing groups within nation-states. Third, a spiritual versus the material conflict exists in Muslim societies wrestling with how to deal with a godly world without God, as they see it. All of these lead to class conflicts, competition for resources, inequality and social conflict as the norm. The ideals of diversity, difference, the notion of a mosaic society, are all amiable, but, in reality, these terms mean nothing without equality, without which no peace can occur. As soon as one tribe regards itself more prized than any other it becomes the beginning of every conflict. This reality is as old as history. It is not going to change it because it is hardwired into human existence. In order to regard instinctual behaviour as group survival, human beings need not be externally challenged by another group. Nature, the environment and the need to subsist have created a predisposition on the part of human beings to survive while in competition with the other. In the seeds of existence lies the basis of human destruction. Conflict has been a function of human history since the beginning of human existence. Conflict resolution, therefore, is the need to solve the problems without amplifying them.

The year 2016 was the worst year for the displacement of Syrians into Turkey and through it into the EU. Leaders in Turkey and the EU played politics with the idea of closing borders, trying to keep the refugees in Turkey, or even working towards a political solution in Syria itself. However, considerable apprehension transpires over what happens when some end to

this problem in Syria finally occurs. If history is anything to go by, after any major conflict in the Middle East, the power vacuum left at the top and the sheer destruction and disarray that has occurred throughout society leaves a tremendous void. Neighbouring powers, as well as the major Western players, invariably place their people in positions of authority as any affected nations face reconstruction, leading to economic as well as political opportunities. However, it is quite clear that it never works out in reality. Massive destabilisation, disillusionment among the people, and disenfranchisement in relation to the political process often leads to anger, frustration and potentially further waves of resistance. This habitually leads to a response by the installed powers to repress dissent. In a global age of resistance, where defiance in the Muslim world is defined not through socialism or ethnic nationalism but through Islamic radicalism, what is there to stop the Islamic State morphing into something similar or potentially much worse?

It is a case of smoke and mirrors in relation to the conflict in Syria. So-called rebels are militarised Sunni groups who are supported and funded by the US and Saudi Arabia through Turkey. The Russians are on the side of Assad, as they have been since the beginning of the conflict. This is why the UN and the EU have been reluctant to go in because they know that behind the scenes Putin is a powerful player. Turkey is bombing the Kurds in Syria (the PYD) because they are close to the Turkish border and they have powerful alliances with the PKK. But Turks are bombing Kurds in the PKK in Turkey, too. Therefore, Turkey is in a complicated position here. Originally, it wanted Assad to resolve matters peacefully by stepping down and then holding elections, which would potentially result in a Sunni leadership, helping Erdogan in his quest for a friendly Sunni neighbour. The US policy is to fund the so-called rebels, train them and prepare them, but these so-called rebels are now isolated as they are being attacked by Russia on one side and Assad on the other.

From the immediate period after the end of the Cold War, the events of the first Gulf War in 1991, Bosnia during the mid-1990s, to Iraq in 2003 and the Arab Spring in 2011, a particular set of patterns have been observed. All the while, the West has had its own struggles as it faces the prospect of increasing economic and financial challenges from the Eastern parts of the world, leading to an ever more intense focus on the Middle East itself. Within the internal power structures of the regions of the Middle East and North Africa, dominant elites focus interest on internal conflicts, not external issues, as they benefit from external opportunities while maintaining internal dissatisfaction. Internally, education sectors, criminal justice systems, the lack of economic opportunity and the focus on security and intelligence maintains the discord, preventing internal change and development, keeping people suppressed. As a way to respond to national challenges because of despotism, militarism and disenfranchisement, and as nation-states allude to geopolitical aspirations, leaving 'the left behind' communities virtually on their own, dislocated and alienated, marginalised groups must resist the dominant paradigms, which are indeed global, not national. The conflicts emerging in the Middle East today are to do with the loss of a local identity and the ability of nation-states to facilitate social mobility, equality and fairness for the 'left behind', whose reaction is to agitate against the geopolitical paradigms that are pulling nation-state elites towards a global bipolar paradigm driven by neoliberalism.

The Solutions

Evidence suggests that inequalities are widening across the world. In this context, there can never be peace. Little or no opposition emerges in relation to individualism, competition, cronyism and selfishness in the West. Simultaneously, the Arabs, the Persians and the Turks have been in conflict for much of recent history. In the post-war period, with the Middle East as a series of once-colonised fragmented nation states, these existing conflicts are not entirely dissipated in the light of internal weaknesses and external interests. The Gulf States, Iran and Turkey have become susceptible to proxy wars and internal challenges that are militarised by external interests. They are also susceptible to the manoeuvring of elites by Western interests, leading to a lack of investment in societies or the need to suppress their aspirations through a form of misdirected or, conversely, neutralised religiosity. The problems in the Middle East are also about adequately addressing elitism. Solutions should focus on mobilising the masses without falling into the trap of political violence and extremism driven by misguided ideological perspectives that have helped to maintain the power structures in a number of Arab states since at least the Second World War.

The conflict in the Middle East has many different layers, although it is too easy to fall into the trap of binarisms. To challenge these dominant paradigms, civil society organisations that focus on values, spirituality, equality and diversity, moving away from the norm of social conflict, need to be encouraged and supported. Good governance at the top needs to be combined with adequate mobilisation from below, leading to the elimination of the instruments of repression, building adequate development projects, introducing wide-scale education, investing in technology, all of which are in the better interests of society as a whole, rather than the few. The ways forward are about moving away from history towards a new theory of change. A process that is mindful of the disinformation that characterises aspects of the global and local knowledge economy. The need to choose between stability, security and democracy also surfaces, but one that realises that anti-globalisation is not necessarily a sectarian or a religious or cultural question.

In the Middle East, political Islam has effectively all but run out of ideas. One can argue that the Islamic State, as the latest incarnation of political Islam, has demonstrated no future for the politicisation or the instrumentalisation of Islam in societies that also possess authoritarian tendencies. In the West, elements of political Islam co-exist with secular, liberal and other forms of conservative Islamism. In the West, Muslims are diverse groups, with different migration histories and narratives. Successful integration in part incorporates the ability of an inclusive government willing to listen and accept opposing voices among some elements of society but, at the same, is open to diversity, potentially leading to positive outcomes for all. The main threat that Muslims face is through the instrumentalisation of Islam, where it can be used as a form of control in relation to limiting resistance against particular dominant policy ideas. A war on terror culture has created significant issues for Muslim minority communities already facing numerous concerns relating to alienation and stigmatisation. Because governments today generally approach communities only through the

lens of countering extremism, liberal Muslim voices that are more open to the idea of cultural and political integration, even if these people disagree with government policies more generally, are given greater credibility in counter-narratives produced by policymakers.

Without necessarily falling into the dilemma of categorising good or bad Muslims, acceptable or unacceptable Islam, the question of instrumentalisation is in need of greater nuance. Depending on one's beliefs and opinions about how far Islam and the West are compatible, this instrumentalisation may not necessarily be a problem. That is, Muslims are free to choose what they wish to believe or adhere to according to the understandings and interpretations of their own faith. However, a concern develops when 'good' Muslims are played off against 'bad' Muslims at the behest of the state, either to generate some form of internal competition for space and recognition or to eliminate specific voices or perspectives seen as antithetical to government diktats. Moving forward requires a greater understanding of these interlinkages and how uneven policies have the effect of potentially making matters worse rather than better. The reality of terrorism is that it does not work (as acts of violence aimed at terrorising populations) – as the terror of the act is quickly displaced by the power of governments to hit back hard – further fuelling the rhetoric of would-be terrorists. In order to break the vicious cycle of violent extremism, it is important to break the cycles of political, economic and cultural exclusions – evening out opportunities to the many, not just the few. In addition, policymakers should temper their rhetoric, especially when it affects the narratives of the radicalisers and the would-be radicalised violent extremists.

The digital age has not increased humanity's happiness or sense of well-being, although there have been gains in terms of information sharing and knowledge dissemination that genuinely benefit groups and societies. However, this information provides knowledge quick fixes that are only temporary, thus adding further to overall anxiety levels. It exposes divisions within families, communities and neighbourhoods, ever fracturing existing established social relations. Meanwhile, the continuation of the age-old systems of capitalism leads to further isolation, disconnection and ultimately alienation, leading to social anomie and social discord. The likes of Islamic State exploit these gaps. The long-term solutions require greater introspection and critical thinking, not merely among individuals and communities, but also among elites and policymakers.

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