

HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract: *The origin of World War II was “Nazism”, a violent totalitarian ideology that crossed national borders and took the lives of more than 55 million around the world. History very often claimed that ethnically motivated religious violence even between communities practicing the same religion is very usual.*

The terrorist attack on USA from 11.09.2001 represents a cornerstone for expansion of religious extremism which easily developed in different forms of terrorism.

Religious extremism offers various challenges at the national, regional and global levels and requires policy makers and practitioners to appreciate the unique nature of these ideologies, many of them seeking the wholesale destruction of civic order as opposed to its reform or even restructuring. Conflicts incited by religious extremism are forcing the displacement of millions people around the world.

Middle East as a region is most vulnerable to religious extremism especially among youngsters. Especially after 11/09 UN, NATO, EU and other regional and world organization for collective security and defense were focused on developing modern and common measures for coping with religious extremism.

The main research focus of this paper is to give an historical retrospective on development of religious extremism and to give an common interoperative and effective measures of UN, NATO and EU for dealing with religious extremism. Also the main researching targets of this paper is religious extremism among young people in the Middle East.

Key words: *historical retrospective, religious extremism, Middle East, recruitment, counter measures*

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Introduction

The link between religious extremism and terrorism seems obvious. Terms associated with terrorism, including violent extremism and radicalization are complex and controversial because of their political implications. The former United Nations Secretary General Ban Kimoon acknowledged this difficulty in his Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (2016), which states at the outset that violent religious extremism (much like terrorism) is a ‘diverse phenomenon, without clear definition’. The Plan of Action concedes that defining terrorism and violent religious extremism is “the prerogative of Member States and must be consistent with their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law³.” Terrorism and violent religious extremism are very broad categories that are frequently aggregated with a range of ‘diverse phenomena, such as guerrilla movements, sectarian militias, and cell-based terrorist organizations’. While the two terms undoubtedly overlap and are often used interchangeably, they could be viewed as being categorically distinct. So, terrorism potentially refers to acts using violence to achieve an objective - while violent religious extremism, suggests aims and motivation. Others have suggested that violent religious extremism is a broader concept that includes, but is not restricted to terrorism. Given the lack of clear definitional consensus, till now is not easy to find the strict line between terrorism and violent religious extremism⁴. Religious extremists are willing to murder because they embrace theologies that sanction violence in the service of God. They have no sympathy for their victims, because they view those victims as enemies of God. And they readily sacrifice their own lives because they expect huge and immediate afterlife rewards in return form⁵. Among the policymakers, two merit special note: First, politicians, academics, journalists, and can best understand religious commitment - even its more extreme manifestations by viewing as a rational or reasonable behavior. The effects of government intervention are, if anything, more pernicious in the realm of religion than in the realm of commerce. To label religious extremism the product of ignorance, coercion, or psychopathology is to foster misunderstanding. To combat extremism (as opposed to extremist violence) with the powers of the state is to invite conflict if that extremism represents a widespread unmet demand for some set of services. To support “good” religion while repressing “bad” religion which invites violence. Religion is often seen as a key cause of conflict on a national and international scene.

³ Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General (2015), The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, United Nations General Assembly. Available at: www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674

⁴ European commission. Operational Guidelines on the preparation and implementation of EU financed actions specific to countering terrorism and violent extremism in third countries, Brussels, 2015, 10-12.

⁵ Eli Berman Laurence R. Iannaccone. Religious extremism: The good, the bad, and the deadly, Cambridge, 2005, 3-5.

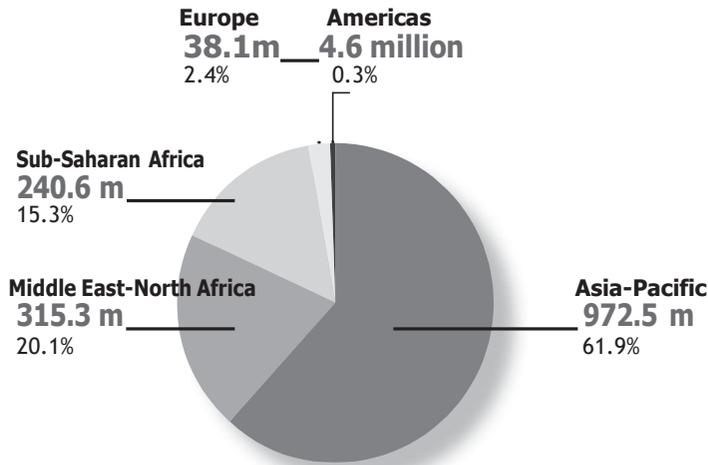


Figure 1: World Muslim Population by Region⁶

According to Samuel Huntington and borrowing partly on an idea by British-American historian, Bernard Lewis, religious extremism would become the most prominent voice claiming that religious and cultural identities would be the main driver of international conflict in the new world order following the end of the Cold War⁷. They argued that although the nation state would remain the most powerful actor in the international arena, the ‘clash of civilizations’ would become the new force fueling conflict. Their categorization of the world into nine different civilizations is based mostly along religious lines. They contend that conflicts can occur both on a local level within a state with groups belonging to different civilizations, or among neighboring states and also on a global level between and among states that belong to different civilizations. They argue that civilizations compete on the international scene, and that this competition can turn into violent conflict, most importantly because of the different religions that have formed these civilizations. Conflict lines on the international scene, he maintains, are primarily those between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world, which have shaped the history of conflict for centuries.

In modern times, jihad was increasingly relinquished under pressure from European colonialism. Although the last Ottoman Sultan Mehmed V called on his people as recently as 23 November 1914 to wage a jihad against the Entente powers and although a jihad is proclaimed even today on some occasion or other, many moderate representatives of a modern Islam have returned to the original meaning of jihad as an effort in terms of moral striving⁸. During XVIII-th century a distinction was made in the Sufi border struggles between “small-scale intervention” in the form of armed struggles against external enemies and “large- scale intervention”, which consisted

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>

⁷ British Academy. The role of religion in conflict and peacebuilding, London, 2015, 15-18.

⁸ British Academy. The role of religion in conflict and peacebuilding, London, 2015, 70-72.

of overcoming the inner self and putting higher values into practice. Always one hypothetical question is not completely unsolved: What are the future forms of jihad in the Middle East and other types of religious extremism?⁹ During the history, international organizations for security and defense such as UN, NATO and EU have been continuously transformed with envisaged need for cultural integration of the Islamic civilization within the spiritual and material cultures which are so diverse even nowadays.

With the US terrorist attack during 11/09/01 another chapter for necessary reforms of National security systems and UN, NATO, EU convention and regulations for coping religious extremism have expanded as top priority for regional and world leaders. Islamic culture that promoted kindness, coexistence and welfare of the society, took a sudden turn.

World scientists and experts have revised their opinions and analysis of mechanisms for conflicts prevention had become more complex, because of the changing of the conflicts nature between civilizations. Power struggles after Muhammad's death in 632, became fierce. Three other caliphs (Omar, Othman and Ali) had subsequently led Islam to the stage of large expansion by conquest and wars, so kneeling two great empires: Byzantine and Persian Empire. The pagans were converted and Muslims split came shortly after the resounding success of the three. So, on the one hand there were the "Sunnis" and on the other the "Shiites". Thus it begins a new stage in the development of a process that we can easily call it "the new world order". Religious extremism had become an important political issue in the world from US terrorist attack 11/09/0, now and for the future¹⁰. Since 9/11, except US also world public has become increasingly interested and often confused by, the politics, culture, and religious precepts of Islam.

The world's Muslim population is over 1.7 billion in the world today, or more specifically, Muslims represent about 24% of the world's population. From the Sufis of Turkey to the Shiites of Iran to the Sunni sects of Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Nigeria, each Islamic religious group possesses its own specific traditions borrowed from its unique ancestral heritage. In short, Muslims do not all think, act and believe in the same way.

So, what we need to emphasize is that the understanding of the world public regarding the promotion of tolerance between Muslim and Orthodox religious communities represents a complex scientific and comprehensive complex social activity at the national, regional and global level¹¹.

⁹Hans Küng. Religion, violence and "holy wars" International Review of Red Cross, Volume 87 Number 858 June 2005, 262-264.

¹⁰Florin Iftode. Is Europe Being Islamized - A Consequence of the Islamic Religion? XI-th edition of the International Conference European integration: Realities and perspectives, EIRP, 2016, 441-443.

¹¹Faegheh Shirazi. Islam and Barbie: The Commodification of Hijabi Dolls, Islamic perspective, Center for sociological studies, London, 2010, 10-12.

1. Religious extremism in the form of jihadi threat in the Middle East

Jihadism has evolved dramatically since the 11.09/01 attacks of United States¹². The movements, leaders and tactics of action are numerous and more complex than the attacks in the USA since 2001. The international community has mobilized unprecedented force against a range of religious extremists from the Middle East. The United States alone has spent trillions of dollars in military campaigns, intelligence, law enforcement, homeland security and diplomacy for counter jihadism. Progress has been made; fewer than a hundred people were killed in the United States between 2001 and the end of 2016 a stark contrast to the death toll of 9/11. However, the threat persists. The emergence of the Islamic State - also known as ISIS - has transformed the world of religious extremism. Since seizing large parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014, the Islamic State has attracted tens of thousands of foreigners who have sought to build a new Islamic society in a modern caliphate. They included engineers, accountants, teachers, teenage boys and girls, as well as numerous newly recruited fighters. They have strengthened existing jihadist movements and fueled a new wave of support for jihadism in general.

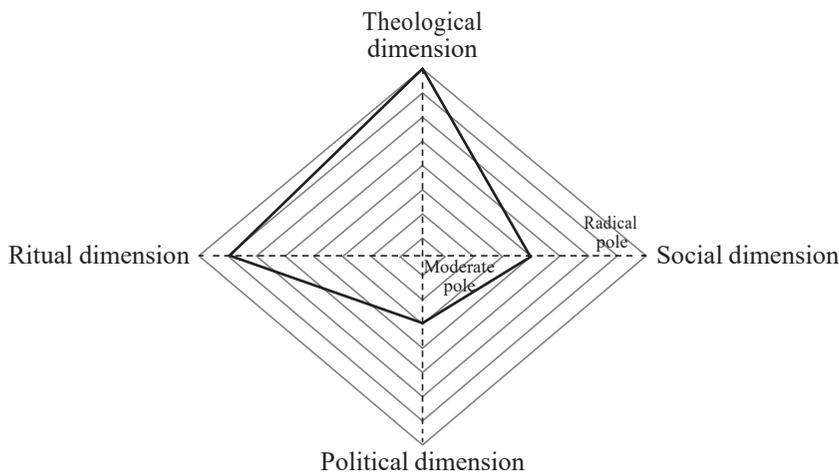


Figure 2: Religious group with high extremism in theological and ritual dimensions¹³

Violent religious groups or individuals as extremist is often misleading. The label has a narrow pejorative meaning which too often associates extremism with terrorism. Failure to understand the complexity of religious extremism risks stigmatizing some religious groups as irrational and supporting of violence when this is not the case.

¹² Nenad Taneski, Borce Chaminski. *Militant Islamism*, Skopje, 2021, 110-112.

¹³ Susilo Wibisono, Winnifred R. Louis, Jolanda Jetten. A Multidimensional Analysis of Religious Extremism. *Conceptual analysis article. Psychol.*, 18 November 2019, Sec. Personality and Social Psychology, 5-7.

These negative stereotypes can lead to separation, loss and discrimination, as well as wasted resources in counter-terrorism initiatives. The comprehensive understanding of religious extremism will facilitate better insight and dialogue. Understanding the multidimensionality of religion in the context of religious extremism will help in accurately depicting this phenomenon and will facilitate understanding the complexity of group processes associated with religious change, which have been neglected¹⁴.

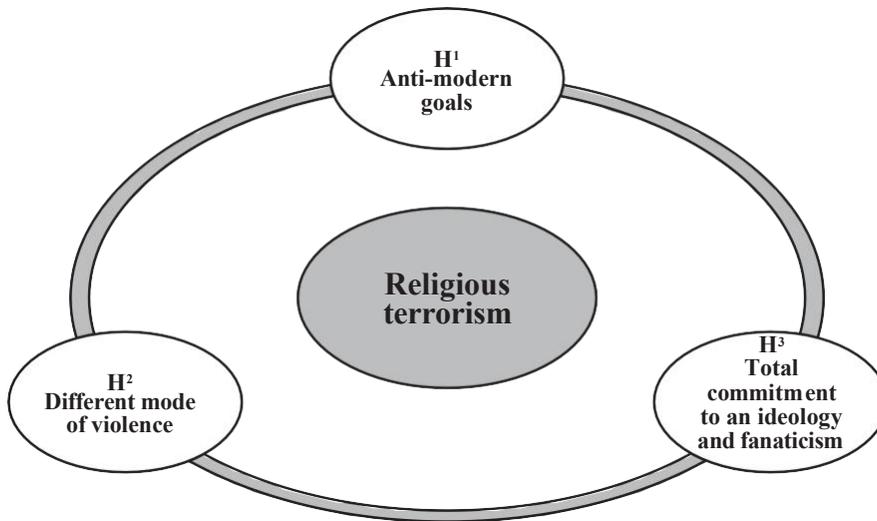


Figure 3: Religious terrorism¹⁵

In 2014, ISIS seemed to eclipse al-Qaeda. But al-Qaeda, the vanguard of the global jihadist movement is trying to regain its primacy. It has built support among local jihadist groups in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and the Caucasus. The core leaders still provide overall directives, although they have also dispersed among the subsidiaries. Advisors help groups define local goals and objectives. Al Qaeda has played the long game and may prove to be a more durable model than the Islamic State. Together, ISIS and al-Qaeda pose complementary threats to global security. But the jihadist spectrum is also much more diverse today than it was at the time of the US terrorist attacks back in 2001. The danger today and in the future is not just from al-Qaeda or its newer global terrorist organization ISIS, but from more hundreds of terrorist organizations that are networked with them¹⁶. It is important to note that the seismic rise of radical Islamist terrorism starting in the 1980s and 1990s has significantly contributed to the frequency and lethality of attacks by religious terrorist groups. Islamist groups especially groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the

¹⁴ Susilo Wibisono, Winnifred R. Louis, Jolanda Jetten. A Multidimensional Analysis of Religious Extremism. Conceptual analysis article. Psychol., 18 November 2019, Sec. Personality and Social Psychology, 14-17.

¹⁵ <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/nigeria-united-in-grief-divided-in-response/>

¹⁶ United States institute of peace - Wilson Center. The jihadi threat ISIS, Al-Qaeda and beyond, USA, 2017, 7.

Islamic Maghreb were responsible for 93.6 percent of all terrorist attacks and 86.9 percent of all casualties inflicted by religiously- oriented terrorist groups. Explaining the higher frequency and intensity of terrorist activity among Islamists in the light of the misinterpretation of certain doctrines and practices within Islam, including the concept of ‘lesser jihad,’ the practice of militant struggle to defend Islam from its perceived enemies or the Muslim reverence¹⁷.

2. UN, NATO and EU measures for dealing with religious extremism

Dealing with religious extremism which is most associated with terrorism, searches for responsibility to monitor, deter and to undertake effective measures to counterterrorism and religious extremism on: national, regional and global level. International organizations, plays a dominant role with engaging nations along principles of complementarity. These organizations such as: United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and others, provides guidance for diverse national expertise and policies to extrapolate best practices across borders. This organization are committed to fostering international peace and security and promoting, freedom, security, social progress and human rights. With their leadership and assistance capacities, they form a global counterterrorism network, establishing standards by which nations can aim to develop their own frameworks. They also help open diplomatic pathways for the sharing of intelligence and formation of regional and international counter-terrorism strategy¹⁸.

Since 2001, there has been a constant increase in the number of victims of religious and violent extremist movements. Groups such as al Qaeda, the so- called “Islamic State” (ISIS), Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya have managed to hold their ground despite international counterterrorism efforts. In 2015, terrorist attacks in Europe further demonstrated the threat that religious extremists pose. The notion of Countering Religious Extremism increasing traction in 2015 among state actors around the globe and has come to be perceived as a crucial component of a sustainable counterterrorism strategy in responding to ISIS¹⁹. The lack of socio-economic opportunities may take many different forms. One of the key ‘unequivocal’ findings of the UNDP Report of 2017 was that economic factors can be significant drivers, with economic exclusion, unemployment and limited opportunities for upward mobility leading to alienation or frustration, which can result in radicalization leading to violent and religious extremism. More specifically, the Plan

¹⁷ Daniel Agbibo, Benjamin Maiangwa. Nigeria united in grief; divided in response religious terrorism, Boko Haram and the dynamics of state response. ACCORD, 2014, 9-12.

¹⁸ NATO. Counterterrorism reference curriculum. Brussels, 2020, 95-97.

¹⁹ Christian Nünlist. CSS Analyses in Security Policy The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism, No.183, 2015, 1-3.

for identifying violent religious extremism defines five primary drivers that are considered to be conducive to violent religious extremism such as:

- Lack of socio-economic opportunities;
- Marginalization and discrimination;
- Poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law;
- Prolonged and unresolved conflicts and
- Radicalization in prisons²⁰.

On the other side, according to NATO, it will continue to counter, deter, defend and respond to threats and challenges posed by terrorist and religious extremist groups, based on a combination of prevention, protection and denial measures. NATO will enhance cooperation with the international community, including the United Nations and the European Union, to tackle the conditions conducive for spread of terrorism and religious extremism²¹.

NATO works closely with the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee and its Executive Directorate, the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force and many of its component organizations and their bodies²². NATO also works closely with UN agencies responding to international disasters, including the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons according to UN 1540 Committee.

With NATO and the EU Joint declaration signed in 2018, they together committed to combatting terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. NATO-EU cooperation in counterterrorism has since reached unprecedented levels, with regular exchanges on counterterrorism projects and on related activities such as work on the protection of civilian populations against CBRN attacks. Inter-staff relations between the NATO International Secretariat and the European External Action Service's counterterrorism section and the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator's office, for example, help foster mutual understanding and complementarity. NATO maintains close relations with the OSCE's Transnational Threats Department's Action against Terrorism Unit, which works to create secure open borders via specialized training of senior officers from national border agencies. Other areas of joint interest between NATO and the OSCE include gender and terrorism²³.

NATO is on the way to increase the cooperation with UN, EU and other international organizations for intelligence sharing, including on the issue of foreign terrorist fighters and religious extremism forms. This kind of cooperation will allow institutional learning by exchanges of best practices, organizational efficiency of united capabilities. It will also allow for mutually beneficial assistance on a range of

²⁰ <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/drivers-of-violent-extremism.html>

²¹ NATO. NATO 2022 Strategic concept, Madrid, June 2022, 7-8.

²² Dombey Daniel. US NATO Chief Chides Europeans Over Budgets. Financial Times, June 9, 2005, 5-7.

²³ Jean-Charles Larssonneur. The evolving terrorist threat: Adapting the allied response preliminary draft report, France, 12 may 2022, 10-12.

cross-border challenges such as cross-border tracking, capturing and prosecuting of potential terrorists.

Conclusion

Religious extremism in the Middle East is often associated with Salafism which is also represented in both forms violent and nonviolent. However this represents a serious attack for local Islamic traditions and practices. It challenges both the authority and legitimacy of local Islamic interpretations. Though salafism has competed with North African Islamic traditions for centuries, this struggle has intensified since the Arab uprisings of 2011, which created public space for both nonviolent salafism and religious extremist ideology to spread. For centuries, Tunisia boasted some of Islam's most important seats of religious education, in particular the Zaytouna Mosque²⁴. Local ulema played an important political as well as religious role into the late years of Ottoman control of Tunisia, opposing many modernizing reforms and the penetration of European influence into Tunisia. The decline of the Ottoman Empire in North Africa and the advent of European colonization undermined Tunisia's traditional religious institutions, though the ulema continued to play an important social and educational role in Tunisian society and, on occasion, sided with the French protectorate authorities to check the power of local reformers²⁵. According to many authors the middle East from the past years had been changed for inevitable, the Arab uprisings themselves came as a complete surprise. The idea that a self-immolating fruit seller in Tunisia could shake the political foundations of the Arab world to their core would have been thought ludicrous just the week before events unfolded. The uprisings from 2011 in Libya, Syria, Morocco, Bahrain and beyond, it seemed clear that these changes would prove transformational. The question was not whether change would come, but how complete it would be. After decades in which authoritarian governments secured themselves by protecting secular liberals and religious conservatives from each other, secular and religious groups were uniting with one another and with an unprecedentedly entrepreneurial generation of young people to rise up against authoritarianism also associated with religious extremism²⁶. For radical extremist, victory is much more obscure. Some proclaim victory in their martyrdom-seeking operations, embracing their own deaths as an ennobling triumph. Some seek reward in a constant battle against mortal enemies. More recently, some have claimed victory in the establishment of their caliphate, a collection of impoverished, dusty cities ruled under the glare of religious believes. What unifies their vision is an acceptance of the idea of deadly conflict stretching far into the future, fought by irregular forces arrayed against better- armed foes. It is a logic that re-

²⁴ Jon B. Alterman. *Religious radicalism after the Arab Uprisings*. CSIS, New York, 2015, 95-98.

²⁵ Kenneth Perkins. *A History of Modern Tunisia*. Cambridge University Press, 2004, 20-24.

²⁶ Jon B. Alterman. *Religious radicalism after the Arab Uprisings*. CSIS, New York, 2015, 175-178.

wards asymmetrical warfare and accepts heavy casualties. For the rest of the world is nothing else than some new trend type of radical extremism in different form of terrorist attack.

Countering religious extremism represent a broad umbrella term to categorize activities that seek to prevent or mitigate. While development organizations and practitioners have individual preferences for applying the terms ‘preventing violent extremism’ or ‘countering violent extremism’, there is often little difference in the specific objectives and actions on the ground between the two. Therefore, overlaps with efforts to prevent violence and conflict by supporting development, strengthening institutions and developing appropriate policy frameworks. The actions have sometimes been criticized for being based on unproven assumptions and with concepts that are insufficiently clear. In practical terms, that means that experts have struggled to draw clear boundaries, such as development and poverty alleviation, peacebuilding, governance, democratization and education.

Recent research proposes that initiatives for combating religious extremism include two main features:

- Specific locations in which they occur with addressing relevant social networks, radical mentors, revenge seeking, pursuit of status and a host of other motivating and structural factors and
- The efforts generally, which aim to target individuals specifically identified as ‘at risk of’, or ‘vulnerable’ to being drawn to violence to the extent feasible in any given location²⁷

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²⁷Naureen Chowdhury Fink, ‘The Blue Flag in Grey Zones: Exploring the Relationship between Countering Violent Extremism (P/P/CVE) and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) in UN Field Operations’, in James Cockayne and Siobhan O’Neil (eds), UN DDR in an Era of Violent Extremism: Is it Fit for Purpose? (Tokyo: United Nations University), 2015, p. 65

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