

Youth Resilience: Counteracting Political Exploitation of Religious Extremism

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Abstract

Religious extremism cannot be limited to only one definition, thus, it is a whole process that should be recognized from various disciplines. Eventually, extremism is inter-disciplinary, which means that it is influenced by economic, social, political and philosophical factors. First, extremism was proven to be the result of psychological constraints. Second, extremism was defined to be originated from political hallmarks, example of the Arab Spring and the emergence of ISIS. And finally, the political strategy to take advantage of religious brainwashing of the fight for “God” was also discussed and interpreted. Consequently, education, social adhesion and youth engagement in interactive activities were shown to play crucial role in counteracting extremism.

Keywords: Religious extremism, youth engagement, counteract, social adhesion, politico-religious interaction, and political exploitation.

I. Introduction

In an article that she wrote for The Washington Post back in 2007, the late Benazir Bhutto said, “Extremism can flourish only in an environment where basic governmental social responsibility for the welfare of the people is neglected. Political dictatorship and social hopelessness create the desperation that fuels religious extremism.”¹

Restricting the term religious extremism to one definition only limits the comprehensive and exhaustive understanding of its origins, its process and its consequences, whether on a small community or on the society as a whole. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize that it should be looked at from various disciplines. The Cambridge Dictionary of Modern English updated its definition of “extremism” following the rise of both the Arab Spring and the start of the war in Syria. It is now explained as “the fact of someone having beliefs that most people think are unreasonable or unacceptable.”²

However, a simple definition from a dictionary does not cut it. Modern scholars agreed that extremism is inter-disciplinary, meaning that it is affected by economic, social, political and philosophical factors. As a consequence, sociologists based their definition on studying the social behavior of an extremist claiming that “[he/she] adopts numerous defensive methods for avoiding contact with conflicting systems of beliefs and their adherents through dehumanizing the imagery of non-believers and religious out-groups.”³ Mentioning the term “extremism” in the Middle East does not refer to religion only; on the contrary, it holds in its folds a huge political definition as well. As such, the politico-religious interaction in the world of extremism suggests wide arrays of definitions. For instance, Ryan Mauro in his article for the Clarion Project, studies the relationship between Islamic extremism and political gain. “Islamic Extremists have intermediate political goals which they believe will pave the way for the global implementation of *sharia*... [They] use violence and terrorism to instill fear and to gain political power in order to establish their goals.”⁴ Another definition of extremism is closely linked to philosophical studies as it exposes the mind of the extremist: What pushes a person to go to the extreme?

¹ Bhutto Benazir, *When I Return to Pakistan*, The Washington Post (2007)

² The Cambridge Dictionary of Modern English (2016),

[<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/extremism>]

³ Kressel Neil, *The Mind of the Religious Extremist*, Global (2012), [<http://www.global-briefing.org/2012/01/the-mind-of-the-religious-extremist/>]

⁴ Mauro Ryan, *Understanding Islamic Extremism*, The Clarion Project (2014), [<http://www.clarionproject.org/understanding-islamism/islamic-extremism>]

What are the psychological factors that affect his inter-personal and intra-personal relationships? What types of communities are mostly prone to terrorist group recruitment?

Before moving forward, it is important to differentiate between an extremist and a terrorist. In his article published by the Brookings Institute, Shibley Telhami, the Anwar Sadat professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland, sheds light on an important notion, “Although religious extremism is something most of us would oppose, we have to be very careful not to jump to the conclusion that the threat stems from religious extremism only.”⁵ The term terrorism refers to “violence that is consciously carried out by the perpetrator primarily in order to influence the attitudes and behavior of larger target audiences.”⁶ In other words, extremists, although firm in their beliefs, do not necessarily resort to violence in order to instill their points of view in the minds of others. However, and based on what was observed during the past decade, it is quite clear that extremism, in many cases, has led to violence, fear, threats; terrorism’s common pillars. In *Fostering Social Resilience against Extremism*, a toolkit published under Leaders for Interreligious Understanding program and summarizing the journey of leaders towards understanding extremism, we mentioned, “Nevertheless our usage of extremism today refers to more than just a belief or an attitude far removed from what is considered to be “ordinary” reality. Extremism means, not only a “perspective effect” vis-à-vis a normative and valued status quo, but indicates a threat to the existing order. Therefore some scholars relate extremism to the use of emotional and/or physical violence; and in conflict settings, extremism can manifest itself as a severe form of conflict engagement.”⁷

The following paper will further explore and study religious extremism not only as a condition, but also as a process: its origins, its consequences, especially the political effects on it. In addition, it will explore whether it can be effectively and efficiently counter-acted on a local level through increasing youth resilience, social belonging and sense of citizenship.

II. The Origins of Religious Extremism

At earlier stages, psychologists associated engagement in terrorist and extremist activities to mental or personal abnormalities. “This line of thinking prompted some clinical explanations for terrorism and a multitude of attempts to identify a unique terrorist profile...However, forty years of research has firmly debunked the notion that only “crazy” people engage in terrorism.”⁸

In other words, and more precisely, religious extremist behavior nowadays is not only studied at the individual level, but on group, community, society and nation-wide levels as well. It is quite essential to understand that someone’s behavior is not altered overnight. Aside from being an established institution, extremism is a well-rounded process as well. In his paper on radicalization and violent extremism, Borum defines this process and divides it into four steps: forming and mobilizing, motivation, arousing and removing barriers. Although content differs from one framework to the other, the consequences are nearly the same.⁹

Dr. Michael Driessen considers that the sources of religious extremism are “multiple, complex and often very poorly understood.” Therefore, he considers that it is important to distinguish between the structure or the framework, the form or the ideas and the personal stories or pathways.¹⁰

The rise of the Arab Spring in general and the start of the war in Syria in particular, were accompanied by the upsurge of religious extremist groups such as ISIS, short for Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Through various reports, it has been clear that the above mentioned group was able to recruit thousands of militants and supporters; especially foreigners.

⁵TelhamiShibley, *Between Terrorism and Religious Extremism*, Brookings Institute (2005), [http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2005/11/03middleeast-telhami]

⁶ Bale Jeffrey, *Definition of Terrorism*, Monterey Terrorism Research and Education Program, [http://www.miis.edu/academics/researchcenters/terrorism/about/Terrorism_Definition]

⁷ Fahed Ziad, *What is Extremism?*, *Fostering Social Resilience against Extremism: a toolkit* published under the LIU program, Danish Arab Partnership Programme (2016)

⁸ Borum Randy, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Sciences Theories*, *Journal of Strategic Security* (2011), Vol.4, p.10

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Driessen Michael, *Sources of Extremism*, *Fostering Social Resilience against Extremism: a toolkit* published under the LIU program, Danish Arab Partnership Programme (2016)

The first step of the process, embodied by forming and mobilizing, starts by defining target groups. The first criterion taken into consideration is ideological targeting. Described as the most powerful “common ground” by many, extremist groups base their media campaigns, which still prove to be quite effective, on shared ideological beliefs, which, in this case are mostly religious, from here emerges what is called referred to in this paper as “religious extremism”. Austin Wright, professor at Princeton University, believes that ideology is an important component because it is mostly codified by its founder and rarely does it change. “A group’s ideology defines their political identity by delimiting an in-group—group leaders, member and supporters—and an out-group—the population a group seeks to coerce through violent opposition.”¹¹ As a result, people are more encouraged to take action for the purpose of defending or imposing something they believe in, or even think they believe in.

Motivation for recruitment comes from various other sources as well. Taking the Middle Eastern region in general and the Lebanese context in particular as an example, there are three basic drivers that push the youth towards extremism: economic factors, social status and fear from the other.

The relationship between extremism and economics is a complicated one. The majority of people coming from underprivileged communities or families are always looking for means of support and economic stability. Faced by the fact that they might find both if they join extremist groups, coupled with the fact that they both share common ideologies is enough motivation for them to join. Yet, Mathew Goodwin and Anthony Painter, both agree in their study conducted for the Extremis Project that economic instability can lead to revolt and violence, but is not necessarily the basic foundation for radicalization and terrorism.¹²

On one hand, extremism was first thought to be an internal psychological illness fed by a variety of external factors such as: poverty, alienation, shunning and social refusal. On the other hand, scholars found a close relationship between the study of the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and extremism. Social identity was defined, after the implementation of the BBC Prison Study which aimed at assigning people to groups of unequal power and studying their behavior, whether it was one of conformity or revolt¹³, as “[A theory] proposing that, when acting in groups, we define ourselves in terms of our group membership and seek to have our group valued positively relative to other groups.”¹⁴ The following plays a role in forming one’s identity and setting imaginary boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not. Although belonging to a group is essential and positive since human beings are social creatures, it sometimes creates unwanted refusal towards other groups and builds up tension between different communities. Extremism in that case can increase due to one of the following reasons: Either members of the group feel that their norms and beliefs should be standardized, normalized, generalized and followed by all other groups because they are the “best” or members of the group that do not possess a sense of belonging will start looking for alternatives. The first occurs in groups where bonds and strong and commitment are high while the other occurs in weaker groups. In her paper for the Journal of Strategic Security, Dina Al Raffie, proves this point by writing, “Low levels of group commitment lead to a weak collective sense of self, and so the group member is not entirely “depersonalized” and likewise not part of a cohesive whole.”¹⁵

Last but not least, the third driver is fear from the different other. This is particularly true when studying extremism in the Lebanese Society. The Civil War (1975 – 1990) has left the younger generation bitter, angry and afraid; afraid from knowing others who think differently, who act differently, who look differently and who believe differently. “Ignoring the larger problems of the region, however—particularly the destabilizing effects of multiple civil wars—is not an option. One cannot deal with ISIS or al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria without dealing with the larger regional problems which have given rise to them.”¹⁶ Although these groups became popular only lately, their formation is rooted in the consequences of the multiple civil wars that happened in the region and the segregation that they have created.

¹¹ Wright Austin, *Terrorism, Ideology and Target Selection*, Princeton University (2013),

[http://www.princeton.edu/politics/about/file-repository/public/Wright_on_Terrorism.pdf]

¹² Goodwin Mathew & Painter Anthony, *Extremism and Economics: A Complicated Relationship*, Extremis Project (2012), [<http://extremisproject.org/2012/08/extremism-and-economics-a-complicated-relationship/>]

¹³ BBC Prison Study (2002), [<http://www.bbcprisonstudy.org/>]

¹⁴ Resources Section, BBC Prison Study (2002), [<http://www.bbcprisonstudy.org/resources.php?p=59>]

¹⁵ Al Raffie Dina, *Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora*, Journal of Strategic Security (2013), Vol.6, p.80

¹⁶ Pollack Kenneth & Walter Barbara, *Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East*, The Washington Quarterly (2015), [<http://twq.elliott.gwu.edu/escaping-civil-war-trap-middle-east>]

Following their devastating financial and psychological effects, the idea of Groupthink became more popular as members of the same nation were divided; each thinking that their own group holds the “universal truth”.¹⁷

Being convinced by most religious leaders into thinking that religious extremism, violence and killing will bring them closer to God, youth are being stimulated to become more extreme, especially after all barriers, rules and norms are being abolished. Using religion as a main source of motivation, constructed extremism aims at maintaining power over a weakened and fearful group or state; thus playing a huge political role and having an enormous political power. Dr. Hashmi, Pakistani scholar, reinforces this idea by explaining that the main factor behind extremist political movements is mostly religious fear, “The common thread that weaves violent political movements together is fear. This is true in case of violent religious movements. The fear of being deprived of something drives one to act aggressively, while the fear of being left out drives movements against prevalent forces... Whenever we ask why people harbor hatred, or why they are willing to kill or die for a cause, the answer is invariably Fear.”¹⁸

Taking all these together, the origins of religious extremism are wide and various, however, in all cases, man can interpret that religion is abused for political purposes. More explicitly, religion is taken into an extremist wave to gain political power.

III. Consequences of Religious Extremism

After discussing the origins and causes of religious extremism, whether individual or collective, it is vital to mention and describe Borum’s theory of conversion. Although the factors may be external, every individual undergoes change in a distinct manner according to the following seven steps.

Taking into consideration that the youth are the main targets of religious extremism nowadays, they first take in the factors that affect their decision, whether environmental, cultural, social, ideological or economic. Being more susceptible and easier to influence, they then go through a state of disequilibrium and start their quest towards finding any sort of solution. Following that, targets encounter the recruiters and start building a close relationship with them, especially after being promised that the gaps in their lives will be filled. Finally, the recruit decides to commit to the cause, extremism in this case, and the consequences of his or her decision become apparent.¹⁹

Whenever the word extremism is mentioned, violence directly comes into mind. Although we previously differentiated between extremism and terrorism, it is undeniable that extremism might lead, most of the times, to violence: whether physical, verbal or psychological. “Sects are high-powered religious organizations, run by credible leaders and peopled by active members carefully screened for commitment. Sad to say, these same institutional attributes are also keys to the successful “production” of organized violence, especially clandestine violence”²⁰, says Dr. Iannaccone, professor at the Department of Economic at George Mason University. In addition, once committed to any extremist group, youth in particular, are unaware that they are being more alienated and more marginalized than before. On one hand, they develop a sense of belonging to their group, while, on the other hand, they distance themselves from their communities particularly fortifying belonging to groups rather than belonging to a nation. Consequently, this makes it hard to separate religion and politics, one of the main issues faced in the Middle East. As long as both are intertwined, then extremist groups will have a larger audience and a palpable effect.²¹

Religious extremism, in itself, has quite a negative connotation. So, how can it hold in its folds some positive effects as well? Extremist groups have negative intentions when trying to lure their recruits using bold titles such as financial stability, social belonging and ideological beliefs.

Surprisingly enough, this sense of security might affect recruits positively, and they may be able, after resuming their mental health, to recognize that belonging to such groups is wrong.

¹⁷Janis, I. (1972). *Victims of Groupthink*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

¹⁸ Hashmi Arshi, Pakistan Politics, Religion and Extremism, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (2009), p.4, [https://www.academia.edu/392212/Pakistan_Politics_Religion_and_Extremism]

¹⁹Borum Randy, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Sciences Theories*, Journal of Strategic Security (2011), Vol.4, p.23

²⁰Iannaccone Laurence, *Religious Extremism: the good, the bad and the ugly*, George Mason University, [http://econweb.ucsd.edu/~elib/rex.pdf]

²¹Ibid.

Although it is far-fetched, it is happening; especially with the educated. Sects or dominations provide the best goods and services to guarantee that their followers will forever remain loyal.²²

Moreover, what starts as an extremist, ideological group might also double up as the “lighter of a revolution”. It is always important to remember that not all ideas are bad, and that some are worth being fully committed to. After all, the Arab Spring, despite its fall-outs, inspired a majority of the youth to stand up and fight for their rights. The idea, all in all, and how it was carried was extremist in nature, but its intentions, were, more or less positive.

IV. Counter-Acting Religious Extremism and Avoiding Political Exploitation

Avoiding political exploitation of religion and counteracting religious extremism; is such a hard, bold and almost impossible task. World-wide organizations, such as the United Nations, are developing exhaustive strategies in order to stop extremist groups through implementing their sustainable development goals. Undoubtedly, having nation-wide policies is necessary; however, this paper will examine how extremism among the youth can be reduced on the local, grassroots level through: applying religious moderation, increasing youth resilience as well as understanding the concepts of “failed states” and the “ambivalence of the sacred”. In a previous publication we argued in favor of this point by saying, “Faith-based and interreligious initiatives are crucial in countering extremism through the protection of the communities and believers from the victimization narrative and the polarization of discourses on the one hand, and through the promotion of interfaith feeling of responsibility for justice, peace, and social cohesion on the other hand.”²³

Although religious extremism does not require explanation, religious moderation does. Most of the youth are being tempted by religious and political leaders claiming that by killing, using violence and refusing others, they would be satisfying “God” and will receive eternal happiness. Those who use religion as a resort of comfort will do their best to adhere to what their Sheikhs or priests are telling them. However, what is quite important here is to apply religious reinterpretation; in other words, approaching extremists and their recruits using their own language through explaining religious texts in a way that brings them closer to the different other. This is especially easy among the youth as they are open and prone to change.²⁴ Reverend Scott Appleby discusses an interesting notion in his book, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*. It basically preaches the idea of going back to the basis of religion, where interpretation is at its minimal; where the only killing is killing of hatred and anger. “Terrorists and peacemakers may grow up in the same community and adhere to the same religious tradition. The killing carried out by one and the reconciliation fostered by the other illustrates the range of dramatic and contradictory responses to human suffering by religious actors. Yet religion's ability to inspire violence is intimately related to its equally impressive power as a force for peace, especially in the growing number of conflicts around the world that involve religious claims and religiously inspired combatants.”²⁵

In brief, education plays an important role in counter-acting extremism, According to Dr. Maria Alvanou, “Culture and education institutes promoting positive behavioral standards like respect for diversity, encouraging free speech and critical thinking, discouraging judgmental attitudes, underlining historical memory (monuments, exhibitions, etc. reminding the loss caused by extremism) and teaching mediation techniques (solving differences in alternative ways).”²⁶

As the conflict in the Middle East continues unabated into its fifth year, Syria’s neighbors and the entire world are still under the threat of extremism. Many reasons play a big role in weakening people’s resilience against extremism. Political and religious frustration, refugees, social inequality, oppression are daily problems faced by the youth in the Middle East. Therefore, they find themselves lost, with no goals or role, and overloaded with many responsibilities that they do not understand. As a consequence, their resilience is weakened.

²²Iannaccone Laurence, *Sacrifice and Stigma: Reducing Free-Riding in Cults, Communes, and Other Collectives*. Journal of Political Economy (1992), 100(2): 271- 292.

²³ Fahed Ziad, *What is Extremism?*, Fostering Social Resilience against Extremism: a toolkit published under the LIU program, Danish Arab Partnership Programme (2016)

²⁴ Liebman Charles, *Extremism as a Religious Norm*, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, [http://users.clas.ufl.edu/kenwald/pos6292/liebman.pdf]

²⁵ Appleby Scott, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*, Abstract (2002)

²⁶ Alvanou Maria, *Tips for Counter-Extremism Strategy*, Fostering Social Resilience against Extremism: a (Fahed, 2016) toolkit published under the LIU program, Danish Arab Partnership Programme (2016)

All actors in the field of counteracting terrorism have agreed that not enough is being done to address the increasing threat of extremism on the youth. Specific concerns include social cohesion, as youth groups in rural areas are left out with no chance for hope or role in the society. Therefore, they fall into the lost identity problem, and they drop the feeling of belonging to a community or even a country. People struggling with lost identity are the extremists' easiest target as they are offered a fake belonging, brother-hood, and role in life, and "the afterlife". Thus, in order to reduce these threats, idle youth need to be engaged and offered opportunities for change and learning, to find their own identity and feel that they belong to their society through assuming roles and responsibilities.

Youth living in vulnerable areas might be easy targets for extremists. Building their capacities will reinforce their abilities in spreading awareness and counter-acting extremism in the areas they are living in. In her academic paper, *Developing Resilience in Urban Youth*, Linda Winfield defines a resilient youth as having "positive peer and adult interactions, low degrees of defensiveness and aggressiveness and high degrees of cooperation, participation, and emotional stability, a positive sense of self, a sense of personal power rather than powerlessness, and an internal locus of control defined as a belief that they are capable of exercising a degree of control over their environment."²⁷ Therefore, projects aiming at developing such youth will help them create non-adversarial relationships with others to increase trust with self and the society and to collaboratively work on implementing counter-extremism activities in their respective communities.

Furthermore, youth should be introduced to the concept of weakened or failed states. "Nation-states fail because they are convulsed by internal violence and can no longer deliver positive political goods to their inhabitants."²⁸ The paradox of luring youths into extremist groups is in fact affecting the economy negatively and decreasing the ability of a nation to support its citizens, thus creating more division, decentralization and communal states.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the origins of religious extremism lie in weak governmental policies and the inability of youth to belong to a nation that doesn't provide security and basic amenities. The process being individual in nature does not erase the fact that people are hugely affected by the communities they belong to; communities that are taking economic, social and ideological advantage of new recruits. Nevertheless, the politico-religious interaction, more specifically, the abuse of religion for political benefits paved the way for a better and smoother emergence of religious extremism. Borum made that specifically clear in his seven-step conversion theory.

Being a religious extremist does not necessarily mean that a person resorts to violence; however its effect, at least on our region, is negative and devastating. The Arab Spring fell short of being completely successful; however, it was able to show the youngsters that there is possibility for change, only if that change is smartly structured and organized.

Therefore, counteracting extremism by increasing youth resilience will prove to be effective. Extremist groups without followers or supporters or recruits can do nothing. They are based on the community they create, and if that community is no longer interested, then these groups will vanish.

Talking about abolishing religious extremism completely is something out of our reach. Despite that, it is the responsibility of every society, every community, every organization and every individual to do what's in their capacity to develop youth abilities and provide them with security and basic services to protect them from deviation.

²⁷ Winfield Linda, *Developing Resilience in Urban Youth*, [<http://ecap-websserver.crc.uiuc.edu/ecearchive/books/resguide/winfield.pdf>]

²⁸ Rotberg Robert, *Failed States, Collapsed States and Weak States: Causes and Indicators*, Ch.1, The Brookings Institute, [http://www.brookings.edu/press/books/chapter_1/statefailureandstateweaknessinatimeofterror.pdf]

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