

A Success Story: The Way Back From Extremism

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Abstract

Within the animosity and brutality of extremist's activities, several success stories of change and reconciliation are being enclosed. In this paper, we focus on the needs of the extremist targets and the gaps that may be filled out by adopting an extremist view. From here, one can notice that extremist groups might emerge either from weak, marginalized groups or from powerful and dominating groups. In either ways, extremism was based on creating a false image of the other and then attacking it. From this point, several leaders made the step of change and chose to move the way back toward reconciliation. Success stories are described in this paper and the reasons behind this decision. Finally, change is a journey of life; it requires motivation tools from exterior stimuli and faith from within the individual.

Keywords: Extremism, change, success story, reconciliation, religion

I. Introduction

Extremism is “grown”, “constructed”, has an “emotional outlet for severe feelings”, is “a rational strategy in a game over power”, and emerges from “apocalyptic, eschatological ideologies” which at the same time is “a pathological illness”¹. As one can tackle the process of extremism, only then, man can understand its origin, path and the efficient tools to counteract it.

McCauley and Moskalenko focus more on the mechanism of extremism and on group dynamics in defining extremism as:

"Increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the in group."²

When defining extremism, one should always put in mind some criteria. It is important to note that recognizing an act as extremist is a relative perspective; the same extremist act can be analyzed as immoral and violent by some groups and as moral and just by other groups. In addition, the gap between powers also aggravates the extremist aspect of the activities. As such, in a conflict between high and low power groups, the activities of low power groups are mostly viewed as more extremist than high power groups. In the same context, low power groups tend to employ more violent activities like suicide bombings. Finally, even though extremist individuals and groups (like Hamas and Islamic Jihad) are usually considered as abusive, these people might be facing conflicts or ambivalence psychologically¹. Taking all these together, this paper will discuss first the needs of extremism's followers, thus, the motivational orientations underlying the voluntary participation in extremist activities. Second, the damage extremism is causing to the aspects of religion. Finally, it will tackle the ways and tools used to shrank back from extremism.

¹ Coleman, P., & Bartoli, A. (2003). Addressing Extremism. Columbia University New York .

² Borum, R. (2011). Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories. Journal of Strategic Security , 7-36.

II. The Attractions of Extremism

In history, suicidal attacks were first related to campaigns with specific objectives: Hezbollah in the 1980s against Israel^{3,4}, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam's struggle for Tamil independence since 1987⁵, the Palestinian organizations against Israel⁶, the Kurdistan Workers' Party's against Turkey⁷ and many others. However, with time, violent activities became related to the defense of the religious nation or community as a whole and the liberation of common religious territories from the considered oppression of the different other; an example is the Al-Qaeda who claimed to defend what is called "*Ummah*" from the far enemy or "*al-adou al baeed*"^{8,9,10}.

Tosini based some of his thoughts on videos and interviews; in his paper he claims that the extremist violent activities like suicide bombing are a result of egoistic and altruistic objective. On the other hand, it is also a feeling of revenge because of humiliation and outrage. Tosini described the mechanism that should be analyzed to understand the aspiration to adopt extremism and commit violent activities. First, the "situational mechanism" that classifies the extremist restrictions and opportunities within political, economic, cultural and military circumstance, second, the "action formation" which eventually manipulate the extremist decision-making; and finally, the "transformational" mechanism that illustrate the interaction of all motivations resulting in the phenomenon of an extremist^{8,11}. Similarly, Ed Hussain who is the writer of "The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside, and Why I Left" He clarified some of the most fundamental aspect of modern life, the nature of Islamism, the personality of a suicide bomber, and the critical inner dialogue of Muslims in and with Western societies.

Krista Tippet who talked with Ed Hussain in during an interview, she portrayed "Husain describes his progressive radicalization beginning at age 16 from an initial curiosity to the exhilaration of jockeying over ideology and power with other student groups and then helping lead a Muslim students association to what he calls an Islamization of the public space at an east London college. Central to Ed Husain's passion was the concept of the *ummah*, the global Muslim community, which could transcend other identities, boundaries, and balances of power. He came to feel most powerfully part of the *ummah* as an active member of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* an organization with a prominent presence in British mosques and universities."¹² From this concrete example, one can tackle two main ideas: first, the need of an individual who follows extremism, and second, the attractions of extremism thoughts that encourage targets from specific community. Individuals originating from a minority or from a low power groups with a lack of stable identity inside a high power world, tend to search for authority. Not only war of authorities is a motivation to follow extremism, but also the eagerness to defend their own beliefs and community.

Taking all these together, individuals who adopt extremist thoughts originate from a vulnerable social group. They tend to search for stability, for identity and for power. The platform available to boost their authority is to choose extremism. In this "comfort zone" individuals put in mind that they are defending their political and religious thoughts. On one hand, they are following the instructions of a leader to fight for their political and demographic beliefs. On the other hand, individuals are well convinced that violence resulting from extremism is justified by religion and faith. As such, for the purpose of defending their religion and fighting for the prosperity of their race, extremists work on eliminating the other considered as invader.

³ Ranstorp, M. (1997). *Hizb'Allah in Lebanon*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan .

⁴ Kramer, M. (1998). *The Moral Logic of Hizballah*. In W. Reich, *Origins of Terrorism* (pp. 131-157). Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

⁵ Hopgood, S. (2006). *Tamil Tiger 1987-2002*. In D. Gambetta, *Making Sense of Suicide Mission* (pp. 43-76). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ Marone, F. (2008). *Il terrorismo suicida nel caso palestinese: una ricerca empirica (1993-2005)*. *Quaderno di Scienza politica* , 207-249.

⁷ Hassan, R. (2008). *Global Rise of Suicide Terrorism: An Overview*. *Asian Journal of Social Science* , 271-291.

⁸ Gerges, F. (2005). *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Moghadam, A. (2008). *The Globalization of Martyrdom*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

¹⁰ Riedel, B. (2008). *The Search for Al-Qaeda*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press.

¹¹ Tosini, D. (2010). *Calculated, Passionate, Pious Extremism: Beyond a Rational Choice of Theory of Suicide Terrorism*. *Asian Journal of Social Science* , 394-415.

¹² Hussain, E. (2008, February 7). *Reflections of a former Islamist Extremist*. (K. Tippet, Interviewer)

III. The Damage of Religion

As previously discussed, one of the strategies to attract followers extremists is the persuasion of the necessity to fight for a religious cause. As such, religion is now a tool to justify extremism. It is now spread that extremist groups aim to defend their religion, as an image

Even though the former head of the counterterrorist division of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Germany Klaus Grünwald described the word “extremism”, he also suggested that extremist Islamic groups had more than 21,200 supporters in Germany by the end of 1993, a number which is still growing nowadays¹³. On the other hand, this example was not discussed to prove that high percentage of Muslim community is supporting extremist groups. For instance, a great majority of Muslims in the West oppose the extremist thoughts. While media doesn’t show it, moderate Muslim leaders and organizations in the West loudly denounce al-Qaeda or September 11¹⁴. On the other hand, visceral responses to extremist acts from non-Muslim communities floated on the surface after the resulting violence. As such, racism and “Islamophobia” increased with time. According to FBI crime statistics, in 2001, crimes against Muslim because of hate reached 1700 percent (from 28 to 481 reported cases)¹⁵. An analogous scenario happened also in Europe in the months following September 11¹⁶. As such, one can deduce from the above information that on one hand, media plays an extremely important role in spreading the “bad” image of religion. On the other hand, people in their nature tend to understand the situation as it is described not as it really is. Meaning by, they see, hear and live the violent acts of a specific extremist group and relate these behaviors to the characteristics of its religion. In their nature, human beings create their own image of others by grasping ideas from here and there and construction a subjective description. However, ignorance of the truth is the main reason for the damage of the “real” and concrete commandments of religion. From here arose the intervention of politics in religion. Eventually, with this stereotype already in mind, people were ready to grasp any political idea that can abolish the “bad” other and – from their perspective – save their communities from these animosities. In his autobiographical story, Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) made the now famous observation that “those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is.”¹⁷ As such, one cannot separate these two phenomena and ignoring the reciprocal effect they might have on each other.

Not only politics affect religion, but also vice versa. Eventually, religion was considered as the main drive in the infrastructure of politics. Urban and Jones suggested that “Since the mid twentieth century, religion has re-emerged as a powerful, often violent and revolutionary force, with profound implications for global politics, social structure and transnational economics.”¹⁸ A concrete example is the Lebanese political system which is explicitly fused with religious belonging. The reciprocal image is way too neat: when the religious people intervene in a political issue, this is when religion is affecting politics. And when political perspectives start to represent the religious manifestations, this is when politics is interfering in religion. The latter case is the most vulnerable situation to the abuse of a specific religion image.

Finally, as previously discussed, media plays a crucial role in promoting exaggerated violent activities pertaining to extremist groups hiding the fact that it represents the extremist point of view exclusively. Media doesn’t show the other facades of the story where other people from the same religion oppose these violent acts and recognize them as extremists that do not pertain to any of their religious beliefs.

IV. The Triggers to Shrank Back from Extremism

“Learning from religion also encourages students to explore such concepts as spirituality, love, right and wrong, and identity and commitment, and to develop sensitivity, tolerance, respect, and understanding towards those whose beliefs differ from their own.”¹⁹

¹³ Grunewald, K. (1995). *Defending Germany's Constitution*. Middle East Quarterly.

¹⁴ Wiktorowicz, Q. (2005). *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

¹⁵ BBC. (2002). *US Muslims Suffer Backlash*.

¹⁶ Allen, C., & Nielsen, J. (2002). *Summary report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001*. Vienna: European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia.

¹⁷ Gandhi, M. (1927). *Autobiography of the Story of my experiments with truth*. India.

¹⁸ Urban, H., & Jones, L. (2005). *Politics and religion*. In S. E. *Encyclopedia of Religion, Politics and Religion: An Overview* (pp. 7248-7260). Detroit.

¹⁹ Halstead, M. J. (2005). *Religious Education*. In *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGION, SECOND EDITION* (pp. 7731-7736).

Halstead explained the importance of learning from religion in getting rid of extremism. Consequently, to learn from religion is to meet, communicate and share ideas with individuals. The more we meet, the more we understand religions. More precisely, meeting peace building leaders may allow extremist or individuals on the way to - or already adopting - extremism to get inspired and shrank back. Sometimes, it is enough to hear or read thoughts of a peace building leader to figure out the way out.

In addition, previous success story showed that in some cases emotional shocks assist in a person's consciousness alert. For instance, after a murder or after any extremist brutal activity, individual may realize that this is not really the deep understanding of religion and that God did not ask you to be so brutal under his name. Watching the brutality of the self is a great motivation to get rid of extremism and change the path. From here, it is important to highlight the story of Ed Hussain who clarified his opinion after being an extremism saying that:

"... we must be honest about this, that there is a sense of real persecution and powerlessness on the part of people who go and become suicide bombers. Either they fail to understand other ways of addressing this issue, be it parliamentary democracy, be it lobbying, be it creating public awareness, be it engaging the political process, or they've deliberately disavowed that route and gone down the route of violence. Whatever it is, that mind-set needs to be opened up and explored and rejected. Right now, throughout the West, we're steering away from trying to understand. So in British government circles, the entire focus is on violent extremism. Without understanding it's actually extremism that you've got to deal with in order to prevent violence."

For him to retrieve from extremism, he experienced an emotional enlightenment that made him open his eyes on the brutality of his acts, by this he explained:

"Not for a moment did I think that once that voice was put out there, once those ideas were implanted in people's minds, that someone somewhere would actually act on that and act on my own doorstep, in my own college campus. So seeing Muslims shout the sort of slogans you hear in Palestine or in Kashmir here in London, and then seeing other Muslims literally take up weapons in the name of faith, and to see a dead body in front of one's eyes as result of those ideas being advocated, I mean, you've got to take responsibility and say, yes, organizations such as Hibul' Tahrir may not pull the trigger."²⁰

Many previous papers discussed the importance of NGOs or even religious communities in retrieving from violence. The engagement in social communities and youth workshops mostly help individuals with "extremist" behavior to get to know the different other and break the stereotype created by their surroundings. Consequently, they can get introduced to the different religion and thus understand the real image of its disciplines.

Not only Ed Hussain managed to get out of extremism, but also the well-known journalist and politician Majid Nawaz who was an activist in Hizbu; Tahrir and decided to leave it. He resisted racial profiling of Muslims and all the brutal acts that may result from it. From his thoughts:

"If it is any adult of fighting age that we screen for, jihadists have turned to grandmother suicide bombers and even animals laden with explosives."²¹

Nawaz argued that society must clearly distinguish its thoughts from the ones of extremism rather than building a competing brand by sticking to its own values. He clarified that:

"It's not Islamophobic to scrutinise Islam just as it's not Christianophobic to scrutinise Christianity."²²

Finally, some causes are more personal. They may result from familial encouragement or commitment. Some extremists become very attached to their families after all this animosity and decide to change their perception and shrank back from extremism. It is most common that individuals who shrank back out of these reasons tend to promote the spirit of dialogue and reconciliation. For instance, Mr. Assad Chaftari was a senior activist in the Christian Militia in Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War and was responsible for many deaths. However, in 2000 he wrote an apology letter to all the victims of his brutality and was published in the national Lebanese press. Since then, he dedicated his life to spread the message of reconciliation and promoting personal change.

²⁰ Hussain, E. (2008, February 7). Reflections of a former Islamist Extremist. (K. Tippett, Interviewer)

²¹ Nawaz, M. (2015). Why ISIS just loves profiling. The Daily Beast.

²² Nawaz, M. (2015, January 11). Being Offended by cartoons . USA.

His story of change began when he was called for a dialogue meeting; when he knew that Muslims will be attending this meeting, he wrote a list of grievances. Similarly, he discovered that they had a bigger list against him too and that Muslims have “real” names and “real” families. As such today he explains that:

“I would venture into the jaws of hell if my story could shift just one person's views and move them away from violence.”²³

Taking all these success stories together, one can suggest that the reconciliation process is a journey. Being able to take this decision to change is a long process that needs extrinsic motivation and intrinsic faith.

V. Conclusion

“For most policy makers, their concern is when the next bombs going to go off and how we're going to prevent that from happening. As long as we're secure, who cares what's going on among the minutiae details of Muslim communal discourse?”²⁴

As mentioned, our policy makers are well concerned about the safety of their people; however, we should be responsible for our own thoughts. Extremism is a widely spread movement nowadays and the danger of its dispatching is being more and more reputable. Nevertheless, there is always a place for change; three success stories where discussed in this paper and several more stories might be emerging every day. While media and the environment around us are focusing on the destruction of the world by extremism, man should turn his eyes toward the success “metamorphosis” stories that are building new perception of the world.

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²³ Chaftari, A. (2013). *Conflict and war, reconciliation*. Beirut: The forgiveness Project.

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