Editorial

Violent Muslim Extremism Flagrantly Dares the World: A Critical Reflection

This editorial reflects on an aspect of the root causes of the current refugee and migrant influx into Europe: Can the Muslim world's extremist elements, who brazenly continue to dare the international community, be decisively defeated so that peace and tranquility can be restored to the Middle East and the world at large? I contend that this menace can be decisively eliminated. However, and most importantly, the international community – all of its potentials, commitments, and declarations notwithstanding – lacks a genuine unity of purpose and a strong will to defeat it.

A Brief Clarification

The definition of a *terrorist* is simple and clear, and yet there is no consensus or objectivity on whom and how to apply it.[1] Although any individual or group that terrorizes others can be described as terrorist, people tend to ascribe it only to those with whom they disagree (mainly Muslims). Thus when their "kind" or allies engage in similar acts they are not terrorists.[2] All those who use violence to terrorize others need to be labeled terrorists, regardless of their political and religious affiliations. I employ *violent Muslim extremists* here because it accurately describes the people I have in mind: Those Muslims who are violent and extremist, and nobody else. But *terrorist* can – and should – be applied to anyone who uses violence against others.

Defeating Violent Extremism?

Defeating violent Muslim extremism will be difficult, and therefore mandates the recognition of certain facts: Its very nature is complicated; these non-state extremists (e.g., al-Qaeda, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and ISIS) are also transnational entities with no standing armies; and their hierarchical structures and members are elusive, mysterious, and highly secretive. The fact that they have

been operating for years is a strong indication of these facts, occasional killings and captures notwithstanding.

But if they are states (as are those accused by the superpowers), they enjoy international legitimacy as independent nations; have their own security and military operatives, even if feeble at times, to both counter external aggression and/or attack another nation; and may have powerful allies or enough wealth to guarantee this continued support and finance their own operations.

Moreover, non-state extremists have devised effective strategies for terrorizing and recruiting new members, which means that their messages are reaching their intended audiences. Until effective alternative messages are formulated and implemented, defeating them will be almost impossible.

Finally, globalization has had far-reaching consequences that all parties have exploited to their advantage, especially by coopting the new media. Unfortunately the benefits of technology in general, and of media in particular, cannot be monopolized by peace-loving societies. However, it would seem easier to confuse this difficulty of defeating the extremists with the impossibility of crushing them. As the former is true, the latter is not. And just because the former is true does not necessarily lead to the latter. Yet despite all of the above-mentioned difficulties, the possibility of defeating them does exist.

Any attempt to defeat violent extremism through military methods alone only begets and guarantees more violence. Extremism can only be defeated via a combination of truly genuine and sustainable policies as well as multi-faceted, concrete, and decisive action. These will be explicated below by tracing a few sources of motivation for the extremists.

Sources of Motivation

Individually, violent Muslim extremists are just as different from each other as are all Muslims.[3] Although they do share a high level of intolerance and propensity toward violence, they are not necessarily motivated by compelling arguments or logical conclusions. Thus whatever motivates them needs to be pre-empted, eliminated, or minimized.

The foreign and domestic policies of western and Middle Eastern nations are important motivators, for they attract those who believe that the West's policies are destructive and humiliating to Muslims in general. Thus the West's support for despotic Middle Eastern leaders must be terminated.[4]

For quite a while, western and Middle Eastern leaders have had neither a genuine unity of purpose nor the willpower to discourage extremism. I argue that if long-term and realistic minor and radical foreign and domestic policy

changes are really instituted and implemented, along with other crucial steps suggested below, violent extremism can be defeated by depriving extremists of a potent recruiting tool.[5]

Both sets of leaders have exploited the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to such an extent that many Muslims (particularly in the Middle East) see this geopolitical conflict as an "Islamic" one, as Muslims being persecuted. Thus the extremists can see their call to support the Palestinians as a legitimate and popular way to "fight" for the cause of Allah.[6] Despotic leaders have also used this conflict as a popular rallying issue to pander to their peace-loving constituencies who are supposedly sympathetic to the Palestinians.

Resolving this conflict would deprive the violent extremists of a major tool. And yet the international community is neither prepared nor willing to do so. Although the Israelis and the Palestinians have – and should argue for – their own interests, so many competing foreign interests are involved that their legitimate interests have been effectively sidelined. In my opinion this is the biggest hurdle, entrenched distrust between the main parties notwithstanding. This conflict has to be resolved in a way that satisfies the interests of both the Israelis and the Palestinians. The ongoing negotiations and "war on terror" have failed.

The Muslims' political, social, and economic realities are also motivating factors. Some analysts have observed that the masterminds and operatives of 9/11 were generally from wealthy, highly educated, and well-connected Middle Eastern, mainly Saudi, families.[7] Critics also suggested that they were neither socially abandoned nor economically deprived. But this completely misses the point of this argument: Osama bin Laden and Muhammad Atta alleged that those realities are sources of humiliation and hardship orchestrated by the West and their lackeys. Bin Laden wrote: "Each of you knows the injustice, oppression, and aggression the Muslims are suffering from the Judeo-crusading alliance and its lackeys."[8] However, the majority of those who joined al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and elsewhere from the 1980s onward, as well as those Europeans and Middle Easterners who join ISIS now, are poor, lowly, and disenchanted Muslim youth – some are even hard-core criminals, not to speak of the majority of those who join al-Shabab and Boko Haram. Clearly, political, social, and economic considerations are huge motivating factors for them.

Resolving this convoluted problem is perhaps the most critical part of defeating violent extremism. One strategy would be for western governments to push their Muslim allies to really democratize, even if only in their own unique way, so long as it works. The Middle East's economic disparity must be ad-

dressed so that its citizens can be empowered. Education must be liberalized and made accessible to all, as well as inform young people of the dangers of violent extremism. The circumstances that led to the Arab Spring proved the need for comprehensive reform. Although the uprisings took popular directions with the participation of the peace-loving majorities, the circumstances also led some disenchanted youth to extremism.

The all-too-common ghettoization of Europe's Muslims must be discouraged via real education and employment opportunities, not to mention genuine respect as equal citizens. If they remain second-class citizens regardless of how long their families have lived in the country, what else can one expect but more generations of frustrated youth without hope – perfect targets for criminal elements and transnational violent extremist groups.

Tackling the extremists' economic incentives involves eliminating their financial and economic sources. Although western and Middle Eastern authorities have closed or blocked some of al-Qaeda's financial sources, the group still manages to fund its activities with relative ease. In the case of ISIS, several questions need to be answered: Who buys their oil from the Iraqi oil fields under their control? How are they being paid? Why is the global community apparently unable to stop these transactions or attack the oil fields? If the extremists can elude capture and attacks, what or who is protecting their immovable oil fields? The attacks on ISIS have proven to be inadequate and insincere.

An honest and holistic approach to defeating the extremists would involve huge amounts of financial and human resources, which most certainly would encounter strong opposition in many countries. But considering the resources devoted to fighting extremism and potential violence, the money spent here would be a far better investment, for it would lead to a successful counterattack. If the West cannot achieve a unity of purpose and willpower, it will continue to fight a losing battle.[9]

Finally, since this editorial's arguments largely hinge upon the lack of a genuine unity of purpose and strong willpower, it would be instructive to substantiate them by simply pointing to the enormous amount of all kinds of resources deployed by the Allies against the Nazis. If the West is serious about defeating violent extremism, it should think about the resources and manpower deployed against the Nazis' actual threat and perceived potential vis-à-vis its current mobilization of resources against the real threat and potential posed by violent Muslim extremists. It seems that the West does not yet consider the latter to be an existential threat, and thus it has neither formulated appropriate responses nor mobilized the necessary resources to defeat them.[10]

This Issue

The last issue of this year begins with Mustafa Gökçek's "Late Ottoman Discourses on Nationalism and Islam and the Contributions of Russia's Muslims." Gökçek analyzes the nationalist and Islamist discourses in the Ottoman Empire during the early twentieth century, especially after the 1908 coup. He zooms in on two groups of intellectuals, namely, the nationalists and the traditionalists, and highlights the activities of the nationalist writer Halim Sabit, an émigré from Kazan, Russia, who presented an elaborate argument on how Islam allowed nationalism and how Turkish nationalism could serve Islam. The author also focuses on Islamist intellectuals, such as Musa Kazım and Said Nursi, who emphasized the unity of the empire's Muslim nations. He concludes that the First World War exacerbated the Islamist argument.

Kubilay Arin's "The AKP's Foreign Policy: From Westernization to Islamization?" follows. The author, originally from Turkey, describes his native country as a "hybrid," a modern and a developing "semi-western" state. Arin argues that although the AKP has tried since 2002 to implement new strategies to transform Turkish foreign policy and make it an important geopolitical actor, he is convinced that Turkey will eventually become ever more "socially conservative" in its Islamic orientation.

Etin Anwar's "The Ethics of *Wasaṭīyah* (Moderation) and the Pursuit of Gender Equality" comes next. One of her paper's main goals is to contextualize why the concept of *wasaṭīyah* as an ethical framework matters and how it provides a path toward gender equality. Anwar discusses how the functionality of *wasaṭīyah* ethics correlates to Prophet Muhammad's pursuit of an ethical formation and his effort in community making. She also examines the implication of this ethics for the pursuit of gender equality and the challenges Muslim women face in promoting a fair and inclusive community.

We close with Fatma Betül Altıntaş' "The Academic Study of Hadith in North American Universities." She contends that Hadith studies, just one of the various subfields of Islamic studies (e.g., Qur'anic studies, Islamic law, Islamic philosophy, and Sufism), has been neglected within the North American academy and that it has received attention largely because of the "authenticity problem." She surveys the historical and contemporary academic study of Hadith in North American universities and examines the space of Hadith studies within the broader curriculum of Islamic studies.

I hope that our readers will find these papers not only thought-provoking and stimulating, but also sources of inspiration and motivation for their own research.

Endnotes

1. A *terrorist* is "An individual who uses violence, terror, and intimidation to achieve a result." Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. S.v. "terrorist." Retrieved September 22 2015 from http://www.thefreedictionary.com/terrorist.
2. When an American Muslim engages in violent attacks, he is quickly and easily described as a terrorist. But when an American non-Muslim terrorizes and kills people, he is anything else but a terrorist. Retrieved September 22, 2015, from http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/13/glenn_greenwald_on_how_to_be?autostart=true.
3. Peter Mandaville, *Islam and Politics* (Routledge: London and New York, 2014), 333-34.
4. Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, eds., *Al-Qaeda in Its Own Words*, trans. Pascale Ghazaleh (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 47-50 and 195.
5. Some American policy changes did occur after the invasion of Iraq under the Bush and Obama administrations. But how genuine and sustained were they? And absent these important factors, how effective have they been?
6. Kepel, *Al-Qaeda*, 106-09.
7. Mandaville, *Islam*, 336.
8. Kepel, *Al-Qaeda*, 47, 195, and 274.
9. Although other factors could also explain the possibility of defeating violent extremism, the aforementioned ones are sufficient to prove the argument.
10. It is understood that violent Muslim extremists are neither a standing army like the Nazis, nor a single nation-state that can perhaps be fought in a relatively easy and straightforward manner.

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