



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Framing the Debate Around Islamic Theology, Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

Fethi Mansouri and Zuleyha Keskin

A HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

When acts of violence are committed in the name of a major faith tradition as global as Islam, there is bound to be debates from all possible intellectual and ideological perspectives on whether the two (religion and violence) are connected. Islam, of course, does not have a monopoly on minority extremist splinter groups that commit terrorist acts in its name (Akbarzadeh and Mansouri 2010). One only has to look to history as well as contemporary politics to find a plethora of such instances. Indeed, Islam's early history contains episodes of violent confrontations between different factions aligned with particular interpretations in relation to

F. Mansouri (✉)

Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation,
Deakin University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
e-mail: fethi.mansouri@deakin.edu.au

Z. Keskin

Charles Sturt University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
e-mail: zkeskin@csu.edu.au

© The Author(s) 2019

F. Mansouri, Z. Keskin (eds.), *Contesting the Theological Foundations of Islamism and Violent Extremism*, Middle East Today,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02719-3_1

succession, spiritual leadership and political governance. These early civil wars led to the first major schism in Islam with the emergence of sectarian divisions around Sunni and Shi'i Islam. The Crusaders' medieval religious wars are another prominent example of violent conflict in the name of God (O'Callaghan 2003). These religious wars were waged against both Muslims and Eastern Christians across the Levant whose practices and doctrinal beliefs were declared heretic by the Latin Church. Yet, while there is still debate about whether the actual conduct of Crusader forces, in particular, in committing massacres against local communities, is incongruous with the stated aims of the Crusades as sanctioned by the church, there is no doubt that religion was at the epicentre of this dark chapter in medieval European history.

When Moorish Granada fell in 1492 during the reign of Catholic monarchs, signalling the end of Islamic rule in the Iberian peninsula, the ensuing Reconquista held all the hallmarks of forced conversions, ethnic cleansing and mass exodus of Moorish communities from Spain towards North Africa and the Middle East (Watt 1992). Like the Crusades before it, the idea of the Reconquista in Spain signalled a deepening religious divide between Islam and Christendom that the Muslims of Andalusia at the time tried to confront with an equally staunch notion of jihad, or holy war. These religiously framed confrontations were further ingrained during the prolonged colonial period that beset much of the Islamic world that came under the direct military and political domination of Christian European powers during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries (Hourani 2013).

Post-independence, and as part of the ensuing Cold War, so called jihad and thus the *mujahidin* once again became central players in many proxy wars that pitted the two superpowers: the USA and the Soviet Union (Coll 2004). Indeed, in Afghanistan, local fighters self-proclaimed as waging jihad rebelled against the government of the pro-Soviet Democratic Republic of Afghanistan during the late 1970s. These rebel groups, that later morphed into the Taliban movement, were aided by foreign actors, including the governments of Saudi Arabia and the USA. Many members of the Taliban movement were taught in the Saudi-backed and inspired Wahhabi *madrasas*, which are religious schools known for teaching a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that contained many of the ideological seeds of today's Islamist violent extremism.

ISLAMIST VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

The brief historical account mentioned earlier shows, in order to understand the complex manifestations and implications of violent extremism today, one has to delve deep into the history that helped shape and drive such nihilistic ideologies. The earlier discussion also shows international political order (Turner 2014), as was the case during the Cold War, also played a part in aiding and sustaining the early formations of contemporary Islamist groups, in particular, during the Afghan–Soviet War with the emergence of *mujahidin* and Taliban groups.

Yet, in a post-9/11 world, the place of Islam as a religion and Muslims in general has become the focus of public debates, security agendas and even an emerging international order where new complex alliances are being formed to confront and defeat an unconventional enemy that is spreading across many regions under different guises but similar ideological claims around misguided notions of jihad, caliphate and Islamic revival (Wright 2017).

Against this context, the place of Islam and Muslims in the world and, in particular, within Western nation-states, has become synonymous with public debates on human security and international terrorism. These debates become even more polarising when images of violent acts of terrorism performed in the name of Islam circulate in the global media. The visibility of such mediated violent extremism, in particular, since the emergence of al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has created a major political and security challenge not only to the world but also to the global Muslim community. This is particularly true in relation to the way Islam is being understood and characterised in contemporary public discourse. The implication of increased problematisation of Islam and Muslims is the rise of Islamophobia as a powerful discursive practice aimed at further deepening the religious and cultural divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, in particular, within Western polities (Akbarzadeh and Mansouri 2010).

What is still missing in the emerging literature on all things Islam and violent extremism is an in-depth examination of the misguided theological notions adapted and adopted by leaders of these groups in communicating their messages to the world and in drafting their narratives for recruiting followers and members from across the globe (Ingram 2016; Rabasa and Benard 2014). While we have witnessed over the last decade an explosion

in new areas of academic studies around terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism (El-Said and Harrigan 2013), the same cannot be said of more careful historical and theological analyses of the assumed connection between the religious (doctrinal and jurisprudential) and the political (i.e. ideology and violent conflict).

This book, therefore, aims to fill this gap by exploring the causes of radicalisation from theological perspectives with an objective to offer critical epistemological responses while at the same time offering sociological understandings of literalist non-traditional (i.e. unprecedented) religious interpretations as well as a scholarly deconstruction of radical narratives.

In doing so, this book includes a number of chapters from scholars working across a multitude of academic disciplines from Islamic studies to political science, from history to international relations, and from sociology to philosophy and philology. The book's chapters were presented at the third Australasian Conference on Islam, which focused among others on examining and refuting the theological foundations of violent extremism and radicalisation. As the conference highlighted, there is a growing body of literature and discourse about the various causes of radicalisation, such as its psychological, social and political. However, there is very little focus on the theological underpinnings and framings of radicalisation; a study undertaken without negating or neglecting all the other causes discussed in the literature.

This book, therefore, offers a theological interrogation of violent extremism that includes carefully selected case studies from contemporary groups across the world. Their religio-political narrative is analysed in detail and put to the test in relation to the foundations it seeks to build on. The aim is to delve into the epistemological basis for refuting the theological justifications for radicalisation and violent extremism that many jihadists often invoke.

BOOK STRUCTURE

Given its ambitious nature, this volume aims to bring together critical scholarly appraisals of violent extremism from the point of view of theology, contemporary politics and circulating public discourse. To achieve this multi-faceted analytical task, the book is organised thematically around three interconnected sections: (1) contesting the theological foundations of violent extremism; (2) the socio-political currents influencing violent extremism; and (3) the role of Muslim scholars in promoting and preventing radicalism.

The first section dealing with contesting the theological foundations of violent extremism starts with Zuleyha Keskin and Fatih Tuncer's chapter, which argues that, in addition to the social, political, emotional and psychological causes attributed to radicalism, Islamist radicals have a further underlying driving force for their actions: a misinterpretation of their religion. The chapter argues that the ultimate trigger for radicalism by Muslims is the theological arguments used to endorse and encourage violent extremism. Such distorted theological arguments have an extremely destructive effect since religious texts are cited to support atrocities committed in the name of religion.

Delving more specifically into the role of misinterpretation of religious texts and traditions, Hakan Coruh's chapter focuses on specific verses from the Qur'an to refute ISIS' narrative by relying on the mainstream majority's understanding of such war- and peace-related scriptural texts. Qur'anic verse 2:256 states 'there is no compulsion in religion', and it is a *sine qua non* of Islamic teaching regarding freedom of religion. However, proponents of offensive jihad claim this verse was abrogated by the sword verse (*ayat al-qital*, Qur'an 9:5). Coruh's chapter analyses the verse from various traditional exegetical and juristic aspects and emphasises that certain classical jurists were influenced by ongoing war-based relationships in the medieval period. Therefore, some verses from the last stage of the Qur'anic revelation are interpreted in such a way that fighting against unbelievers unconditionally will be a continuing norm and other verses are interpreted accordingly. Coruh argues that verse 2:256 declares a final universal principle about the freedom of religion, and unconditional fighting due to faith is not a mainstream Islamic approach. The natural state of affairs in relations between Muslims and others is peace and cooperation, as many mainstream Islamic authorities emphasise.

Arguing along similar lines, Jan Ali's chapter examines the conceptualisation of human dignity and jihad in the ethical discourse of Muslim violent extremists, such as ISIS members. Ali shows that human dignity and jihad are conceptualised differently by these groups because their ethical discourse, while being coloured by the notion of seeking redress of socio-religious and political crisis of Muslim societies, is nevertheless grounded in a politically expedient interpretation of Islamic scripture. Notions of jihad and human dignity have assumed a priority status in ISIS' language with almost unique meanings and, as such, are rendered social constructs. Ali's chapter further analyses the influence of ISIS and other radical groups through the use of such concepts by considering social constructivism and the resultant power of language.

The second section of the book focuses on the socio-political currents influencing violent extremism, analysing the complexities of the interplaying causes, resulting in such violence.

In mapping an epistemological approach to Islamism and violent extremism, Mohammed Sulaiman's chapter notes the literature on Islam and violence has been examined from multiple, interdisciplinary perspectives. He concludes the consequent broad range of interpretations are characterised by deep, and at times irreconcilable, disagreements. One school of interpretations tends to emphasise that violence is intrinsic to Islam because Islamic texts, history and theology are replete with calls for Muslims to wage violent jihad against the 'infidels'. From this perspective, it seems violent Islamist manifestations, such as ISIS, are an authentic expression of the true Islam. Another school of interpretations argues Islam is a religion of peace, and violence of the ISIS sort is completely external to it, that is, un-Islamic. Therefore, violent Islamist groups and individuals are only distortions of what Islam really is. Sulaiman rejects both positions and details how recent non-essentialist scholarship has demonstrated that both approaches have serious epistemological shortcomings. Drawing on non-essentialist scholarship, Sulaiman argues that understanding Islamist violence, let alone providing a plausible explanation of it, requires careful examination of the complex, immensely varied political and socio-economic contexts in which Islam is practised and Muslims exist. More importantly, however, emphasising the polysemic nature of Islam and Muslims does not negate its relevance to the study of Islamist violence. Therefore, Sulaiman's chapter discusses the implications of the non-essentialist claim 'there is no one Islam but only many Islams' and concludes that both Islam and the political contexts of Muslims matter.

Riaz Hassan's chapter further delves into the politico-social state of Muslim countries arguing that the modern Muslim world is a pale shadow of its past. Islam's spiritual and moral egalitarianism has not bolstered some of the key benefits of modernity in the Muslim world, namely economic prosperity, democratic freedoms and the advancement of knowledge. On the contrary, an astute observer would have little difficulty in assembling volumes of data to demonstrate the acute deficits of development, freedom and knowledge in most of the Muslim countries. This has given rise to contentious debate about the causes of these deficits. Hassan's chapter examines some of these debates and explanations of the causes of development, freedom and knowledge deficits in some detail and discusses explanatory frameworks that may account for them. While not negating

the theological discourse of radicals, Hassan argues radicalism has its roots in the social and economic conditions prevalent in Muslim countries, which can then have an impact beyond the boundaries of those states at the international arena.

Halim Rane's chapter presents the findings of focus groups conducted with young Muslim Australians on the causes, consequences and counters of violent extremism and radicalisation. A range of perspectives within and beyond faith are addressed. Within the context of countering violent extremism and radicalisation, the broader question of Islam in Australia emerges as an important issue that needs to be considered within a national climate of rising Islamophobia and exclusionary discourse of identity and belonging. The impact of the discourse around radicalisation is evident among the youth, who are still forming their identity as Muslims living in the West. While many youth find violent extremism to be antithetical to their understanding of Islam, they are conscious that some youth are drawn into the narrative of groups like ISIS, highlighting the importance of education, including critical thinking and grounded knowledge, in relation to matters of religion.

The third section of the book focuses specifically on the role of leadership in influencing the response to local and global events, particular in relation to their capacity to promote as well as prevent radicalism and violent extremism within their faith communities.

Greg Barton analyses the appeal of ISIS by examining the central lines of narrative in the ISIS magazine *Dabiq*. *Dabiq*, which was published in English as well as various other European languages, provides insight into ISIS' messaging and how it influences the youth. While ISIS' message is often thought of as dark and cruel, Barton highlights that there are nine major themes in the 15 issues of *Dabiq* that were published which are seemingly good: (1) justice, (2) goodness, (3) a sense of belonging, (4) the caliphate (*khālifa*), (5) migration in the path of God (*hijra*), (6) redemption, (7) sin, (8) judgement and (9) jihad. While there are dark elements inherent in these themes, some of the darker themes are presented with a strong focus on positive messages. Using images such as happy children and villagers or warriors in combat gear tenderly cradling kittens seeks to generate a positive image. The magazine is also filled with mainstream teachings about prayer, fasting and heaven, which normalises the other messages found within the magazine. Barton argues this positive messaging needs to be considered carefully to appreciate the level of influence of groups like ISIS. That is, ISIS and other similar groups cannot really be

understood without accounting for the make-up of their religious messages, however distorted these might be.

Ihsan Yilmaz looks at the influence of unofficial political Islamic law on Muslim youth and the significant impact it can have on their radicalisation. Yilmaz explains how the Justice and Development Party (AKP) elite has increasingly resorted to Islamist legal pluralism, anti-Western rhetoric, *takfirism* (excommunication) and conspiracy theories that simultaneously try to influence global *umma* (community) and the Turkish diaspora communities that predominantly live in the West. On the basis of preliminary observations, Yilmaz discusses the potential impact of this rhetoric and production of unofficial Islamist *takfirist* and anti-Western *fatwas* (legal rulings) on the transnational radicalisation of the Turkish Muslim youth in the West.

Mahsheed Ansari's chapter on Said Nursi's non-violent social activism examines the extent to which such activism can be seen as a basis for a refutation and response to the re-emergent neo-kharijite sects in Islam. Ansari's chapter critically examines Nursi's exegetical work, the *Risale-i Nur*, and discusses his theological argumentations and methodology that refuted the prevailing discourses of his contemporaries, particularly those of the neo-kharijites. The aim of this analysis is to distinguish between Nursi's theology-based apolitical non-violent activism, which can be contrasted to the theological arguments that endorsed an activism rooted in political Islam. The comparative analysis of these theological arguments provides a solid framework to analyse contemporary Islamic movements and their political, civic responses to the world, ranging from non-violence, to social and political activism and finally to violent extremism.

Finally, Derya Iner's chapter on proactive religious activism aimed at eradicating radicalism argues that religious views can be instrumentalised to legitimise violent actions. Yet, paradoxically, religion is also used by mainstream Muslim leaders to tame the emotional eruptions of Muslims and curb violent reactions in the face of injustices and grievances. This chapter focuses on Fethullah Gülen's sermons over a three-year period delivered right after major arrests, seizures and vandalisms targeting his followers in Turkey since 2014. The chapter analyses how Gülen guides his followers against violent reactions through his religious speeches. Examining the influence of religious rehabilitation from a real-life scenario, Iner proposes a proactive strategy that continuously and unconditionally produces positive thinking and action, thereby leaving no room for radicalism and no need for its refutation.

As the book highlights, one of the biggest challenges confronting studies of violent extremism is the multitude of theories that still cannot exhibit any level of methodological precision, let alone a clear analytical power, especially when it comes to the prevention of violent extremism. The growth in current literature on this topic is undeniably important, since violent extremism and radicalism are not diminishing. Yet, as the contributions to this book collectively argue, when studying violent extremism, understanding the world view of groups like ISIS is essential. Merely stating their claims are un-Islamic is not sufficient, while the wrong diagnosis in terms of root causes can have dramatic effects and possibly further contribute to the radicalisation process (Lindekilde 2012).

Systematic reviews of literature regarding radicalisation and violent extremism involving the review of 1280 articles identified seven key drivers conceptualised as: uncertainty-identity theory, quest for significance, devoted actor model, mindset and world view, reactive approach motivation for aggressive religious radicalisation and the two-pyramids model (Gøtzsche-Astrup 2018). The common thread linking these various drivers is the association of violent extremism to classical Islamic concepts that are used by radical groups. Therefore, regardless of how one approaches the analysis of these historical and theological drivers, religious justification seems to be at the core of discursive constructions of violent extremism. While other important factors, such as psychological and mental health, socio-economic deprivation and identity crisis among Muslim youth, can add to the risk of an individual's embrace of violent extremism, these alone and without religious narratives remain insufficient as conduits towards radicalisation. That is, religious framings and theological discourses, which have been distorted from the mainstream understanding, are at the centre of contemporary articulations of twenty-first-century violent extremism.

CONCLUSION

This book provides insights into the theological arguments put forward by radicals as part of their overarching narrative by scholars of the field. This is done by analysing inherent Islamic concepts, such as *jihad*, *hijra* (migration), *takfir* (excommunication) and caliphate, which have been misinterpreted and misused in an unprecedented way by these groups. Through the use of social media, violent Islamist groups have been able to reach far and wide to influence Muslims, especially Muslim youth (Weimann 2014; Klausen 2014)

and in many cases recruit them to their extremist aggressive agendas. The importance of reclaiming these concepts from extremists has been discussed to some degree in the literature (Abou El Fadl 2007; Yaqoubi 2016); however, very few studies or publications have sought to do this in a critical multidimensional manner, taking into consideration a number of other important factors. This book has started the conversation by delving into an analysis of some of the fundamental problems in the way Islam has been used to justify violent extremism. The mainstream understanding of concepts, Qur'anic verses and *hadith* that have been loosely invoked by radicals have been carefully analysed and in many cases refuted by experts in the interconnected fields of Islamic studies, jurisprudence, history, political science and sociology. This multi-faceted rebuttal was addressed in particular in the first section of the book.

However, this has not been done in isolation. Other factors that have played a critical role in influencing the response of Muslims to the religious narrative of radicals have also been explored in this book, particularly in the second section. The counter-narrative of radicals would have minimal effect if it took place in a socio-political vacuum. It is now a well-established fact the radical narrative has a significant impact on youth who are feeling disenfranchised and lack a sense of identity, in particular, within the Western countries where they live (Verkuyten 2018), while at the same time being affected by their Muslim brothers and sisters suffering in various parts of the world (Stern and Berger 2015). Furthermore, there is the problem of a lack of Islamic grounding in the religion, especially among second-generation Muslim migrants and Muslim converts. The latter group in particular encounters radical groups before they have accessed and been exposed to a strong foundation in mainstream Islamic teaching, which further complicates the situation in relation to overall understanding of core Islamic principles. The overall economic, political and educational state (or lack of) within many Muslim countries does not help the cause (Halliday 2003). A combination of all these factors exacerbates the way certain individuals and groups respond to the perceived injustices, and unfortunately in many cases ISIS-type narratives ensure that this becomes a violent extremist response.

The first two sections of the book converge around an emerging gap within the broad violent extremism agenda: the critical role of religious and community leadership, which was discussed in depth in the third section. How community leaders encourage individuals and groups to respond to what they perceive as injustice plays a critical role in what takes

place at grassroots level. A leader can inspire cross-cultural and transnational initiatives and in some cases social movements, which are able to respond in non-violent ways to such extremist narratives and practices. It is in this area that more research is needed in particular around the role of religious (Islamic) leadership in the West and how this might play a protective role, in particular in relation to the radicalisation of Muslim youth. The lack of clear and strong leadership has left a critical vacuum that influencers in the mould of ISIS have tried to occupy.

REFERENCES

- About El Fadl, Khaled. 2007. *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*. New York: HarperOne.
- Akbarzadeh, Shahram, and Fethi Mansouri, eds. 2010. *Islam and Political Violence: Muslim Diaspora and Radicalism in the West*. London/New York: I.B.Tauris/Palgrave Macmillan.
- Coll, Steve. 2004. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. New York: Penguin Press.
- El-Said, Hamed, and Jane Harrigan. 2013. *Deradicalising Violent Extremists: Counter-Radicalization and Deradicalization Programmes and Their Impact in Muslim Majority States*. London: Routledge.
- Götzsche-Astrup, Oluf. 2018. The Time for Causal Designs: Review and Evaluation of Empirical Support for Mechanisms of Political Radicalization. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 39 (1): 90–99.
- Halliday, Fred. 2003. *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hourani, Albert. 2013. *A History of the Arab Peoples*. updated ed. London: Faber and Faber.
- Ingram, Haroro J. 2016. *The Charismatic Leadership Phenomenon in Radical and Militant Islamism*. London: Routledge.
- Klausen, Jytte. 2014. Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38 (1): 1–22.
- Lindekilde, Lasse. 2012. Neo-liberal Governing of ‘Radicals’: Danish Radicalization Prevention Policies and Potential Iatrogenic Effects. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 6 (1): 109–125.
- O’Callaghan, Joseph F. 2003. *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Rabasa, Angel, and Cheryl Benard. 2014. *Eurojihad: Patterns of Islamist Radicalization and Terrorism in Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stern, Jessica, and J.M. Berger. 2015. *ISIS: The State of Terror*. London: William Collins.

- Turner, John A. 2014. *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Verkuyten, Maykel. 2018. Religious Fundamentalism and Radicalization Among Muslim Minority Youth in Europe. *European Psychologist* 23 (1): 21–31.
- Watt, W. Montgomery. 1992. *A History of Islamic Spain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Weimann, Gabriel. 2014. *New Terrorism and New Media*. Washington, DC: Wilson Center Common Labs.
- Wright, Lawrence. 2017. *The Terror Years: From al-Qaeda to the Islamic State*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Yaqoubi, Muhammad. 2016. *Refuting ISIS: Destroying Its Religious Foundations and Proving It Has Strayed from Islam and That Fighting It Is an Obligation*. Virginia: Sacred Knowledge.