INSIGHT

Egypt's Dar al-Ifta Combats Extremism

ISSUE # 1

UNEARTHING
THE ROOTS OF
RELIGIOUS
EXTREMISM

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Understanding
THE THREAT OF
RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

The rising trend of religious extremism which adopts the policy of hegemony of a certain radical ideology to the exclusion of other ideologies which refute their radical bases and debunk their extremist beliefs is the malady of our time. Among other world religions, Islam has been subjected to extreme ideologies and miscreant beliefs which could not be any further from the core teachings of Islam both in letter and spirit. We will delve briefly into the history of religious extremism with its dominant features for us to have a better understanding of what we are up against.

• The contemporary origins of extremist movements

One of the religious movements that is featured with extremism is a movement that started in the 19th century. After conducting some deep investigations and researches in an attempt to unravel their understanding of the Islamic doctrine, we found that their understanding is limited to issues that are both secondary and scholarly debatable.

• Holding tight to the opinion of a minority of scholars

They only hold tight to a minority of scholars who share their same religious belief and they chose to turn a blind eye on the overwhelming majority of scholars who are widely known for their intellectual discernment and religious scholarship.

They adopted a radical school of thought and its advocates believed that they exclusively hold the correct version of Islam that matches the thoughts of the early Muslims and expresses their understanding and application of Islam.

• Three assumptions of the radical mentality

They adopt a clashing mentality and this mentality has three assumptions within its fold. The first assumption is that the whole world hates Muslims and that there is a constant war to demolish them through three main entities Zionism, proselytization and secularism. They also assume that Muslims are the main targets of plots and conspiracies which are sometimes concealed but most of the time they are out in the open.

The second assumption is that clashing with this world is a necessity to revert the aggression and tyranny along with avenging for what is happening in the Muslim world. The necessity of clashing takes two forms, the first is killing non-believers which include all non- Muslims and the second form is killing hypocrite apostates who are presumably Muslims yet opposing their line of thinking. We can readily observe the mythical fallacies and erroneous beliefs which unfortunately might attract some ignorant youths to their false call.

The third assumption is that their methodology of thinking is meant to spread widely to become one of the current methodologies of thinking in our world today and this means that their methodology does not need to be confined to a certain organization or a specific institution which we can track but rather spread freely and the loyal believers of this methodology have a free hand to do what they can to spread this methodology with no higher commandment or official orders.

• Collective responsibility to combat radical ideas

Redirecting the path of these extremists is becoming a real burden on both the progress of Muslims and the renovation of the Islamic religious discourse along with the comprehensive development that the whole Muslim world needs. Unfortunately this extreme line of thinking is becoming a fertile soil for developing extremist ideologies and a base for disintegrating the society and a call for isolating oneself away from his surroundings which most of the time he/she is incapable of dealing with in the first place.

• Wrong Claim

The alleged claim by extremists that they attempt to follow the path of the early pioneering Muslims is erroneous because the mere confinement to the literal wording that they uttered or abiding by their juristic positions that they took regarding secondary issues is not what defines the essence of Islam. The true emulation would be through turning to the tools and maxims they adopted in textual interpretation and the principles used for conducting independent legal reasoning (ijtihad). The early Muslims were pioneers in writing down the guiding maxims and in developing a scientific methodology which enabled them to differentiate between the primary overarching issues and the secondary debatable ones.

Therefore, the true Muslims are the ones who abide by the scientific methodology that the early ones developed in order to deal with scriptural text of the Quran and the Prophetic traditions. Within the fold of the methodology developed by the early Muslims lies a room for multiple opinions and different views. This diversity did not tear their Islamic unity apart or the unity of the later generations of scholars. On the contrary their diversified opinions left a huge intellectual heritage which stands as an eye witness of scholarly diversity and freedom of thinking.

Therefore, we ought to exert our efforts to fight against this extreme ideology which no longer represents a danger to itself alone but is forming an eminent threat to our youth and society in whole.

Response to Radicalism: an Islamic Perspective

1-The Islam that we were taught in our youth is a religion that calls for peace and mercy. The first prophetic saying that is taught to a student of Islam is "Those who show mercy are shown mercy by the All-Merciful. Show mercy to those who are on earth and the One in the heavens will show mercy to you.

What we have learnt about Islam has been taken from the clear, pristine, and scholarly understanding of the Qur'an, "O people we have created you from a single male and female and divided you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another." When God said "to know one

another" He did not mean in order to kill one another. All religions have forbidden the killing of innocents. Rather we have been ordered to cooperate in a constructive manner.

2-For over a thousand years ordinary Muslims have worshipped God, engaged in developing their society, and have sought to cultivate good moral character. This is made clear in the Qur'an which says, "I have created man and Jinn except to worship Me." "He caused you to dwell on earth and to develop it." " He is successful who has purified |the heart and soul| ." there are more than 6,000 verses in the Qur'an, only 300 of which are related to legal matters; the rest deal with developing good moral character. Likewise there are over 60,000 prophetic traditions and sayings of which only 2,000 are related to legal matters; the rest deal with developing good moral character. For Muslims the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is described as being a mercy sent from God to mankind.

3- Islam established a moral and humanistic civilization that encompassed a plurality of religions, philosophies and civilizations which contributed immensely to the Muslim civilization. We see ourselves as a people who have absorbed a multiplicity of civilizations; we have been exposed to and assimilated the great civilizations of the Persians, Indians, Chinese, and Greeks into our cultural and intellectual life, and we benefited from all of them as well as contributing to them. The Islamic civilization places people and worshippers above places of worship. This humanitarian and cosmopolitan worldview does not allow us to consider ourselves as superior to other people. We are proud of our civilization, but we do not reject other civilizations, rather all who work towards the constructive development in the world should be considered as our partners. Since our civilization is concerned with humanity, it brings together both the spiritual and the material. We do not hate life nor do we seek to create social imbalance, and anyone who engages in this has gone against the teachings of our religion and what we have been taught of good moral character.

4-One of the problems faced by religious communities today is the issue of authority. In both Islam and other religions we are witnessing a phenomenon in which laypeople without a sound foundation in religious learning have attempted to set themselves up as religious authorities, even though they lack the scholarly qualifications for making valid interpretations of religious law and morality. It is this eccentric and rebellious attitude towards religion that opens the way for extremist interpretations of Islam that have no basis in reality.

Furthermore, and this is very important, is that none of these extremists have been educated in Islam in genuine centers of Islamic learning. They are, rather, products of troubled environments and have subscribed to distorted and misguided interpretations of Islam that have no basis in traditional Islamic doctrine. Their aim is purely political and has no religious foundation. It is to create havoc and chaos in the world.

Our role as religious leaders who have spent our lives carefully studying religious exegesis is to re-establish authority with those who are in true possession of knowledge.

5-Some commentators from the non-Muslim world have taken the actions of a small but highly visible and disruptive minority of people within the Muslim world to represent the beliefs of the majority of Muslims, claiming that Islam has been a violent religion from the beginning. This view has unfortunately been reinforced through the presentation of Islam in much of the mass media.

6-The source of and alleged justification for much of the extremism and political violence across the Muslim world and beyond is the tragedy of Palestine, which has not been resolved for the last 60 years. We need to understand this complicated situation in order to end the daily bloodshed on both sides. Egypt was quick to answer the call to peace nearly 30 years ago, but to this day we have not arrived at true peace as a result of the intransigence of all parties. Let me be clear by reiterating that Islam is utterly against extremism and terrorism but unless we understand the factors that provide a rationalization for terrorism and extremism we will never be able to eradicate this scourge. This must be understood in order to build a better future that can bring an end to this grave situation that is destroying the world.

7-Many people have made an issue of the fact that there are certain verses in the Qur'an that allow Muslims to defend themselves when they are attacked. This is something that can be found in every religious law and civil code, and more recently we find it being sanctioned by the Geneva Conventions. The Qur'an says: "Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you but avoid aggression for God does not like the aggressor." "But if they cease (fighting) then God is Forgiving, Merciful." This statement has been repeated many times throughout the second chapter of the Qur'an and forms the basis for the Islamic law of warfare, which is only for the purpose of repelling an attack and protecting one's self, one's home and family.

The extremists have misused the word jihad and, unfortunately the mass media, being ignorant of Arabic and the subtlety of the

Radical Groups: Many Sides of the SAME COIN

The famous statement which indicates that "history repeats itself" cannot be more true than in the case of our modern day terrorism which plagued the minds of half-educated and ill-hearted extremists whose warped logic and deviant ideologies established the brutal platform of shedding blood and gave them the effrontery of randomly killing both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, torturing the captives and the hostages, enslaving women, looping money destroying places of worships and sanctuaries, usurping authority and gaining power among many other atrocious acts falsely under the name of Islam and Jihad.

• **The emergence of Kharijites during the time of Prophet Muhammad**
Along the line of history we find that this sickened ideology has deep roots which dates back to the Kharijites, a name which was given to a group of people at the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who were known for their lack of discipline and good manners along with their extremist mentality and excessive zealotry; thus they carried the seeds of terrorism for generations to come.

The kharajites first appeared in the days of the Prophet and their ideas gained momentum during the caliphate of 'Uthman until it emerged as a full-fledged and organized group during the caliphate of Ali ibn Abi Talib. God Most High alluded to the Kharijites in the Quran and there are many prophetic hadith reports that explain their signs, beliefs, doctrines and practices. In general, the Kharijites committed acts of terrorism and carried out atrocities in the name of Islam. Due to their extreme and specious religious arguments, they would declare it permissible to shed the blood of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Throughout this article we will examine the relationship between the beliefs and actions of the Kharijites of old and the terrorists of today.

• **The definition of "Kharijiities" by Muslim scholars**
The classical Muslim scholars have given a precise definition of the Kharijiities. Imam Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani said in his famous book of heresiology, al Milal wal- Nihal, "Anyone who revolts against the Muslim government that enjoys the support of the community is called a Kharijite whether this revolt was against the Rightly Guided Caliphs or during the time of the companions or against those after them who followed them with excellence or the Muslim rulers of every subsequent era."

• The Quranic rejection of the Kharijites' radical mentality

The Quran has strongly rejected in numerous places the heinous act of murder, especially murder on a mass scale that spreads terror and mischief on earth. According to the Quran those who commit such deeds are considered brigands and rebels. A thorough study of the Quran will shed light on the many signs and blameworthy innovations of the Kharijites.

• The radical acts of Kharijites at the Prophet's time

The turmoil of the Kharijites began during the time of the Prophet. Abu Sa'id al- Khudri said, "When the Prophet was apportioning the war booty, Dhu al-Khuwaysira, a man from Banu Tamim, said, "O Messenger of God! Be Just!" The Prophet replied, "woe to you! Who will be just if I am not just?" It was Dhu al-Khuwaysira's disrespect to the Prophet that laid the foundation for one of the worst trials faced by the Umma. And the militants and rebels who revolted against the authority of Uthman and Ali were a continuation of the evil precedent set by Dhu al-Khuwaysira.

Thus the later-day Kharijites had the same mindset as their founder.

• Sewing Discords by the Kharijites after the death of Prophet Muhammad

Those who embraced the beliefs of the Kharijites promoted their warped understanding, exploited these disruptions and began organizing themselves. Those who actively hatched the conspiracy against 'Uthman, and ultimately killed him in the final days of his rule, were composed of those who held the extremist beliefs of the Kharijites. The most prominent of them was one 'Abdullah b. Saba. This was the first time an extremist and terrorist group challenged the authority of the state.

• The major objective of the Kharijites

The major objective of the Kharijites is to destabilize the foundations of the Muslim state in the name of religion. When we look critically at the history of the Kharijites, we see that theirs was a violent movement that was against dialogue and peaceful settlement of disputes, such as the policy that Ali, the fourth rightly guided caliph, adopted in the form of arbitration before the Battle of Siffin. As long as the clamor of war prevailed, the Kharijite elements in Ali's army were active, but the moment he decided to seek arbitration for the sake of avoiding further bloodshed, they rejected his decision and deserted his troops. Calling him a disbeliever, they organized a terrorist rebellion group and rose against him and the Muslim Ummah in the name of Jihad. When they organized themselves, their motto and call was, "There is no judgment but for God". When Ali heard their slogan he said, "A word of truth by which falsehood is intended".

• Establishing an organized terrorist group to challenge the authority of Caliph Ali b. Abi Taleb

The Kharijites initiated an armed rebellion against Ali and based themselves in Harura, located on the Iraqi border. They accused him of polytheism and blameworthy innovations and declared him a disbeliever and rebelled against him. This would prove to be the start of their mass killing and terrorism.

They strictly observe the outward religious acts, which in turn instill in them the conceited belief that they are staunch Muslims and true embodiments of Islam. They feel themselves near to God and consider all others either disbelievers or disobedient. They believe it is their right to force others to adhere to the path of righteousness and they forget God's words, "Invite to the path of your Lord with wisdom and goodly invitation". (16:125)And, "There is no compulsion in the religion" (2:256)

This mindset allows them to kill people, spread terror and plunder wealth and property without fear of sin. According to their warped understanding, whatever crimes they do are a form of jihad. The Quran informs us that they will be the greatest of losers in the Hereafter: "say, Shall we inform you of those who are the greatest losers with respect to their deeds? It is those whose entire struggle is wasted in the life of this world, but they presume they are doing good".

• History of brutal killings by the Kharijites

One particularly heinous event occurred when the Kharijites brutally slaughtered Abdullah b. Khabbab and his wife for refusing to declare 'Uthman and Ali disbelievers. Imam al- Tabari, Ibn al-Athir and Ibn Kathir narrated: They put him on the ground and slaughtered him, causing his blood to flow into the water. Then they advanced towards his wife and she said, "I am pregnant, don't you fear God", Then they sliced open her stomach and killed

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three other women from the tribe of Tay (because they sympathized with her).

When Ali learnt about the murder of Abdullah b. Khabbab, he dispatched al- Harith b. Murra al- Abdi to the Kharijites to investigate the incident. When he reached the Kharijites and asked why they murdered Abdullah, they killed him as well. Ibn Kathir mentioned that after this, the Kharijites wrote to Ali, Saying, "All of us have killed your brothers and we believe that both their blood and your blood are lawful".

When Ali dispatched Qays b. Sa'd b. Ubada al- Ansari to go and negotiate with the Kharijites, he addressed them saying, "O servants of God hand over those of you who we want, and obey the authority of the state that you have challenged. For indeed, you have committed a grievous crime; you accuse us of polytheism and shed the blood of the Muslims.

Similarly as Ali's representative, Abu Ayyub al- Ansari also tried to convince the Kharijites. He said, "O servants of God. Certainly, we and you are in the same state as we were before. There is no hostility as such between you and us, so why do you fight us for?" Their terrorists and rebellious state of mind is also revealed in the address Ali made to the kharijites, "explain to us by what justification do you declare it lawful to kill us and rebel against the authority of the state and take up arms? And then you go out and slay people! Indeed this is most surely a clear loss. I swear by God, it would be seen as grievous in the sight of God that you even kill a chicken with this intention, so what about a harmless

soul that is considered inviolable in His sight?

When Ali presented the banner of peace to Abu Ayyub al- Ansari, he went out and said, "Whoever takes refuge under this banner is safe, whoever abstains from fighting and killing will be safe; and whoever amongst you heads to Kufa or to the other towns and abandons this group is safe"

The Kharijites would base their call for religion on the Quran. Expressing their religious zealotry, they would rouse extremist's sentiments in some of the hapless and ignorant Muslims and misinterpreting Jihad, they would incite them to commit mass murder. To motivate them further they would mention the rewards of paradise so as to mentally prepare their followers to kill and be killed.

• Conclusion
If we analyze the methodology and activities of the modern-day terrorists, we see that they are mentally immature, young and brainwashed, and have the same modus operandi as the Kharijites of old. Their warped view of Islam is plain to see on the one hand they are very devout in their worship and on the other hand they have no compunction in killing peaceful people. Ibn Kathir reported that once the branch of a date palm fell during a journey and one of the kharijites picked up a date from it and put it in his mouth, a fellow Kharijite objected and reminded him that he did not have the owner's permission. Immediately, the man spit it out.

Similarly, Imam Ibn al Athir related that once when a pig owned by one of the non-Muslim citizens passed by a member of the Kharijites, he killed it with his sword. A fellow Kharijite condemned him for killing it and when its owner came he begged his pardon, paid its price and made the man happy.

The historical records prove that the Kharijites considered blood a cheap commodity. They had no reservations about killing people and cared not one iota for those who were brought up with the Prophet's spiritual training. Since the Prophet made it categorically clear that these people would continue to emerge, time and time again, it is easy to recognize the modern-day Kharijits, for they share the same traits of those of old. They too shed the blood of people; they too brutally slaughter women and children and challenge the authority of the state; they too attack mosques, murder peaceful people engaged in worship and target them in the marketplaces; and they too call their dastardly deeds jihad. All the current acts of terrorism committed by the so-called "Mujahidun" are but a continuation of the Kharijite doctrine and ideology.

Striking the roots of radicalism: Reclaiming Islam's intellectual heritage

• Countering radicalism has been the main focus of global counter-terrorism efforts in recent years. These largely operational strategies have yielded some success. But terrorists have displayed a high level of resilience and adjusted their strategies accordingly. Though operational capabilities have been weakened, radical groups have shifted to "franchising" their violent ideologies to like-minded groups and individuals, with the Internet increasingly becoming their main media. The outcome of this strategy can be seen in that almost a year after the self claimed Islamic State announced the birth of their caliphate, activists identifying themselves as holy worrier, although a small percentage of Muslims, are increasing in number and geographic dispersion.

Not even a single state is immune to the threat of radicalization via the Internet. The incidents in the past year mark an important shift in the struggle against terrorism and radicalism here. This is because from an intelligence perspective, self-radicalized individuals are harder to monitor and detect compared to those who belong to a group.

Furthermore, it is equally challenging, if not impossible, to control the activities on the Internet effectively.

More importantly, it illustrates that now, more than ever, we need to target the extremist ideology at its innermost core. The battle is in the realm of the hearts and minds, not merely in the use of guns and through legislation.

**• The first question we need to ask is:
What drives the heart to radicalism?**

Radicalism is the internalization of a set of beliefs, including a militant mindset that embraces violent jihad, as the paramount test of one's conviction. In the case of an extremist, we realise that his radicalization was sparked by a desire to become a better, practicing Muslim. This, incidentally, was also the case with many extremists who, when interviewed, considered religion as their top-most priority more crucial than developing themselves socially or economically. What they were saying was that in an increasingly secularised world, their search for excellence went beyond material concerns. It was, in fact, equated to a search for spiritual meaning. And it was to fill this spiritual void that they sought to deepen their knowledge and practice of Islam. In fact, the extremist is a part of a global phenomenon of Islamic resurgence today. One of the main effects of globalization is that some individuals increasingly find it difficult to cope with rapid changes without losing their inner sense of security and identity. This happens across many societies, not just among Muslims. Yet, one of the options that many Muslims take to preserve their identity and values is to uphold the values and identity offered by Islamic teachings.

Unfortunately, many Muslims today are not equipped with the proper knowledge to adapt true Islamic teachings to the demands of a rapidly changing world. This is the result of a deepening intellectual and moral crisis across many Muslim societies.

The origins of the crisis can be traced back to the 19th century when the Muslim world, along with other non-western parts of the world was challenged by the economic, political and cultural hegemony of Europe. As a result of adopting foreign concepts without first evaluating these concepts and incorporating only what is of value through the guidelines of their own intellectual heritage, Muslim

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scholars from both dogmatic literalists (what is commonly known as fundamentalists) and modern liberal secularists(or modernists) were born.

For instance, Western thought had the effect of intruding upon the integrity of the Islamic intellectual tradition by mutating and marginalizing several of its disciplines. For example, Sufism came to be viewed as a mystical, personal experience of the religion and thus sidelined from mainstream Islamic practices. This, Omid Safi asserts can only be argued if one looked at Sufism through the lens of post-enlightenment theories of religion. The rejection of this core Islamic teaching which emphasizes morality and spiritual cleansing signifies the onset of an intellectual imbalance and subsequent moral decay within the Muslim ummah.

This can be seen manifest in the many problems that currently beset many Muslim nations and leaders who struggle with many issues which have directly or indirectly responsible for the insurgencies and terrorism-related activities in the world.

The crisis is deepening with a current trend towards anti-intellectual minimalism spearheaded by the dogmatic literalists.

This group of people strongly rejects the diversity of views, broad range of thinking and varying levels of rational discourse found in the intellectual Islamic disciplines in the past. Instead, they insist on a worldview based on a narrowly defined traditionalist in the past which forces doctrinal conformity and rigidity.

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