Berghof Foundation

Religious Institutions and the Challenges of Extremism and Terrorism
The Long View

Radwan El Sayed

Content

1   Introduction

In his lead article "*Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism: The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding*", Mohammed Abu-Nimer makes a timely contribution to discussions on the efficacy of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) bodies and programmes. One prominent argument he makes refers to the role of religious leaders and religious institutions in transforming violent extremism (Abu-Nimer 2018, 7ff.). While I agree with this argument, I think it deserves particular attention and further consideration, particularly in relation to a practical approach. I also think that it should be looked at beyond the question of potential cooperation of religious leaders in data- and intelligence-gathering to help security agencies, which often dominates public debate. Although this might be true to an extent, it is also true that religious leaders and religious institutions have a very genuine interest in developing and strengthening their own prevention approaches. A securitised approach or "instrumental" involvement of religious leaders in P/CVE efforts would certainly undermine the constructive role religious leaders and religious institutions can play, as Abu-Nimer rightly argues. Based on the genuine interest, the constructive potential and the current window of opportunity, I would like to dig deeper into the question as to what religious institutions can really do and what they are currently undertaking, and give some practical recommendations as to how they could be strengthened in their prevention efforts, based on my own experience.

My own background is that of a scholar of Islamic Theology. I first studied at the Religious Institute in Beirut, and then pursued my studies at the Faculty of Theology at Al-Azhar University. I acquired a PhD from Germany and lectured at several Arab, Islamic and Western universities where the main subjects were jurisprudence, theology, exegesis and political thinking, as well as history and modern Islamic groups. Over the last few years, I have focused also on providing practical recommendations and supporting dialogue attempts with religious institutions in the field of prevention of violent extremism. Therefore, I hope this text will contribute to understanding and confronting challenges in the religious domain and strengthen the constructive potential of prevention by religious leaders and institutions.

This article will trace how religious institutions have dealt with the phenomena of radicalisation and violent extremism since the early 1970s and the role these institutions have recently played in C/PVE programmes. My essay intersects with the discussion in the lead article on the lack of clear long-term strategies and tool kits that assist religious institutions to participate effectively in C/PVE programmes without threatening their credibility with their constituencies. (1) This includes the necessity of empowering the religious institutions to develop tools and frameworks that use the language of faith and reflect their spiritual and religious traditions. (2) Based on the impact of a certain securitisation of C/PVE approaches in the region on the religious institutions and their constituencies, I am convinced that it is important for religious institutions to rebuild the trust with their constituencies based on the principle of inclusivity and enhanced outreach efforts.

2   The Rise of Religious Extremism: Emergence and Impacts

Islamic religious institutions have confronted major challenges in the context of religious extremism, which has developed into violent extremism and terrorism. Across the region, the religious institutions were surprised and shocked by the strong emergence of violent extremism in the early 2000s. They neither expected nor were they prepared for the task of addressing this issue because they lacked the vision as well as the structures, capacities and tools to do so. To understand the reasons for the weakness of religious institutions in this regard, it is

important to trace and look at the role of religious institutions across history and how they evolved in their respective political and social contexts. In my reading, there are two main factors as to why religious institutions have been unable to cater to the needs and address questions of the contemporary world. One of these factors is rooted in the relationship between the religious institutions and the developing nation-states and their different trajectories across the region. In simple terms, these relationships between nation-state and religious institutions range from following the guidance of the nation-states blindly or even exploiting these institutions to support the doctrines of the state in some countries to the exclusion or marginalisation of religious institutions in other countries. Ultimately, however, both relationships, "subordination" or "side-lining", led to increased dependency of these institutions on the state and to the adoption of the state's security-based approach to deal with the phenomenon of violent extremism. The second factor relates to these institutions' attempts to promote intellectual and religious reform, which led to attacks upon these institutions from two sides: from "rival" Islamic groups, and from nationalist and leftist groups. While some of the Islamic groups accused religious institutions of violating the religious heritage, nationalists and leftists blamed them for being stuck in the past. While religious institutions were busy protecting the Islamic traditions and heritage against these attacks, fundamentalist groups were seeking to exploit these institutions' weakness by promoting extreme interpretations of concepts such as "Jihad" and "Takfir"[1] with the aim of developing radical ideologies as a basis for seeking dominance over the Islamic sphere.

Against this background and being caught by surprise, the primary reaction of many Islamic religious institutions was initially limited to issuing fatwas condemning violence in the name of religion. They further argued and constantly reminded people that extremist groups such as Al Qaeda or Daesh are just like the old "Kharijits"[2], who fought against the authorities; they thus provided religious interpretations out of the current context. This, in my view, was a major underestimation and misunderstanding of the danger and impact of the emergence of these extremist groups, which is rooted in history. It took some time for the importance of addressing and preventing violent extremism under the leadership of the religious institutions to be recognised.

Since the rise of violent extremism in the 1970s, accusations have been levelled at these religious institutions by the authorities, intellectuals and the media. Some blamed them for being powerless vis-à-vis the supposedly increasing attractiveness of more radical discourses, while others have accused them of complicity. As previously stated, I would argue that it was weakness on the part of the religious institutions and not connivance. Religious sheikhs themselves have become victims and were killed by violent extremists, either because they were considered to be agents of the state and security authorities or because they were accused of following an 'improper' religious path. Moreover, these institutions for a long time did not take part in the states' strategies to fight extremist groups; this was, however, not rooted in sympathies of the sheikhs of these institutions with the ideologies of violent groups, but stemmed from their lack of understanding of the phenomenon and its threat to religion.

The initial impression of religious institutions' sheikhs, and perhaps some politicians too, in the 1970s was that these extremists were no more than political opposition or a protest phenomenon among poor and marginalised young people, clad in a religious guise. Based on this reasoning and in the political context of the time, they considered that these phenomena should be dealt with through the security institutions. Meanwhile, the security forces were incapable of dealing with these phenomena on their own and sought to add the religious dimension to their security tools. The security forces thus tried to convince

---

1 Jihad and Takfir are two concepts that have been subjected to numerous research studies and fatwas since they were hijacked by many political and religious groups over the ages to justify various forms of violence. Jihad can refer to internal and external efforts to be a good Muslim or believer and to informing people about Islam. And the greater Jihad is the spiritual struggle within oneself against sins. Takfir is to accuse someone of disbelief and polytheism.

2 *Kharijites* were a former Muslim group that appeared in the first century of Islam and set themselves apart from mainstream Islam with their radicalised ideology. One particular characteristic of *Kharijites* is their excommunication of any Muslim who commits major sins or any Muslim who does not agree with them. There is therefore no room for disagreement within these fanatical groups; anyone who does not agree with their methodology of interpreting Islamic sharia is automatically threatened.

the sheikhs that these young people had a religious vision, or at least their senior cadres had. It took some time – as well as a re-reading of the texts inciting violence which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s (AlMawdudi[3]) – before some scholars began to notice that this violent extremism could not be understood as a mixture of psychological problems and political protests, as many had previously assumed, but that a particular vision of religion was indeed being adopted and promoted.

Nowadays, governments in many Arab countries are in the process of consolidating national statehood; religious institutions have realised that in order to fulfil their mandate and protect their pivotal role with the communities, they have a genuine interest in complementing these efforts by developing a contemporary religious discourse, which entails an understanding that reconciles religion with civic values such as citizenship, national unity and co-existence[4].

3 National States, Official Religious Institutions and Radical Islamic Groups: The Contest for Religious Authority

The tendency of radical groups to refer to the verses of Quran or Hadith as their main religious foundation was the starting point for violent action. Over decades, the phenomena of radicalisation began when the well-educated devout (those having or showing strong religious commitment) developed their vision and understanding of the holy script according to their own interpretation of the different texts, despite their lack of religious education and the ability to deal with such complicated texts. Additionally, these interpretations were strongly influenced by the positions of these devout individuals on pressing issues of the time, such as colonialism and the evolution of modern nation-states. Gradually and outwardly, these devout began to react to different political events that took place after 1919, creating a new stream of religious thinkers with a political discourse whose content and tools differed from those of the mainstream national discourse. In Egypt, for instance, the main focus of many activists was to expel the British, end the occupation and establish a nation-state based on a modern constitution and political parties. In 1922, a constitutional monarchy was created and Egypt was striving to follow in the footsteps of other modern states. Meanwhile, religious groups were being formed and created; the above-mentioned devout were the core of these groups. Furthermore, in accordance with their understanding of their faith, these religious groups took a negative view of the socio-political developments and the formation of new nation-states (in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine). All these events and dynamics have enabled these religious groups to develop an alternative discourse with religious "flavour".

How did the Arab and Islamic authorities deal with official religious institutions between the 1950s and 1980s? There were three forms of cooperation: in the military and in progressive countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Algeria, Indonesia and Pakistan, the focus was on weakening these institutions, which were regarded as very traditional and unable to deal positively with these countries' modernisation programmes; there was also an aversion to alignment with the Soviet Union. Major Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Morocco have

---

3 Sayyid Abu A'ala Maududi was a Muslim philosopher, jurist, journalist and imam. His numerous works covered a range of topics such as Quranic exegesis, hadith and history. He developed his own vision of interpreting holy texts in a political frame, which we now call Political Islam. Maududi's theories influenced the rise of some Islamic regimes (Sudan 1980) as well as the original ideologies of Egyptian Muslim brotherhood.

4 Examples of the involvement of religious institutions in rebuilding the nation statehood: (1) Training of sheikhs on human rights values in Jordan. (2) Training of sheikhs on international humanitarian law in Lebanon.

preserved and strengthened these institutions, but also forced them to comply, whereas smaller countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia and Mauritania opted for neutrality or indifference.

Additionally, the eruption of violence in the name of Islam was directly and strongly influenced by the different incidents that radically changed the socio-political and, to some extent later on, the geopolitical discourses and dimensions in the region. Religious groups (this term refers to groups that operate beyond the official religious institutions) had a role to play by either initiating or supporting this radical change. To clarify this point, some events inspired religious groups, such as the success of the Iranian Revolution and the emergence of a theocratic state. In addition, these events did not have an impact on the official religious institutions or the new emerging challenges. On the contrary, the loyalty of the official religious institutions towards the state remained undimmed and, accordingly, their popularity suffered. The best example to demonstrate the inability of the official religious institutions to counter radical religious groups, during the first stages of religious violence, was their intellectual stagnation towards the two main emerging concepts; "Islam is Religion and State" and the "Absolute Divine Sovereignty", which were the basic foundation on which religious groups lobbied and advocated for their religious discourse as the one and only alternative to weak, dependent and infidel states. Both concepts have created a deep division in Islam, especially amongst some Sunni streams, which to some extent were inspired by the developments in Iran to legitimise violence and establish their own theocratic state. Nevertheless, this development and the repercussions of the two concepts were not dealt with immediately by the religious institutions, as explained above. Other actors, such as the Americans and the Pakistanis, even supported or exploited these groups in their ongoing conflicts with the Soviets in Afghanistan and against communist parties in Sudan and Indonesia. Simultaneously, the importance of these official institutions for the authorities faded as these states opted for a securitised rather than an intellectual approach to deal with radical groups.

4 Religious Institutions' Responses to the New Era of Violent Extremism

Nonetheless, prior to the incidents of 11 September 2001 and the evolution of „Islamic terrorism" into a global phenomenon, as well as the war against it, the relatively strong religious institutions in Egypt, Morocco and Saudi Arabia did not see any need to engage in an intellectual war against extremism. Once they realised the real danger of these phenomena, after the rise of Al Qaeda and Daesh, and considered these groups as a rift in religion, these countries recognised the important role of religious institutions in transforming violent extremism and began organising conferences and seminars to condemn extremism and terrorism in the name of religion. They also discussed correcting the religious concepts to which extremists and terrorists adhered, such as their interpretations of the application of Sharia, Jihad and rebellion against the state, and aggression against civilians in the land of Islam and worldwide. They also worked on reviving the relations with major international religious Christian institutions. The Jordanian religious institution and Al-Azhar in Cairo in particular have crossed these boundaries with declarations against violence, calling for national unity, a civil state, citizenship and freedom.

5 Confronting Violent Extremism: Challenges and Ways to Move Forward

All these efforts mentioned above were of crucial importance, especially in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. But much remains to be done. There is a lack of clear long-term strategies and tools that help religious institutions to participate effectively in C/PVE programmes without threatening their credibility with their constituencies. There is thus a need to empower religious institutions to develop tools and frameworks that use the language of faith and reflect the spiritual and religious traditions – as Abu-Nimer has mentioned in his article (Abu-Nimer 2018, 10, 17) Moreover, the securitisation of some C/PVE programmes has affected the relations between religious institutions and their constituencies and there is a need to rebuild trust, following the principle of inclusivity and dialogue, while avoiding the pitfalls of securitised approaches.

Religious institutions have not started the process of structural reform yet, although it is much-needed and a principal matter that has future implications and prevents the formation of new generations of extremists and terrorists. In this regard, I have drawn attention to these issues in some of my research, using two terms in this context:

1) *Qualification:* this implies acquiring new knowledge and tools for re-reading religious texts, exploring new phenomena in societies and the drivers of extremism, studying the global atmosphere surrounding Islam, examining the situation of new Islamic communities in Europe and the world, and identifying the drivers behind the growing Islamophobia. Moreover, there is a need to develop new media tools and channels that serve to spread the messages of moderation and take into account the evolving discourse of youth.

2) *Rehabilitation:* the term describes a process aiming at assessing and reforming religious programs, curricula and educational concepts in schools and universities. Both, in Islam and in politics and sociology, there are controversies about reform of religious and societal discourse. Many attempts to introduce change or adapt new concepts were rather destructive(e.g. on the one hand, how "Jihad" was reinterpreted by some groups, how an application of Sharia is advocated for or how the state is being subjugated to religion by other groups, yet also, on the other hand, how religious reform is often demanded based on applying a European approach which does not fit or reflect the context and conditions in Arab countries or superficial criticisms of the kind that "Islam is the problem"). Perspectives on these issues could not be further apart between more extremist Islamist currents and radical secularists. Allowing the space for more radical voices to overshadow a more nuanced discussion, religion has become an element of division, not an element of unification. What is needed, therefore, is to revise the content of religious discourse based on a moderate middle ground, catering to the needs of the contemporary world and allowing for reform beyond the dichotomy between the more radical or secular concepts mentioned above. Additionally, we need to re-evaluate and renew religious curricula in schools and universities in order to face the new challenges imposed by modernity and globalisation and to keep up with their fast-paced development.

I am aware that many committees and working groups were established to serve this purpose; nevertheless, Qualification is an essential prerequisite to Rehabilitation. This is not due to the fact that extremists and terrorists are Islamic schools and universities graduates; in most cases they are not. Extremist and violent ideologies have emerged outside religious schools and universities. Professors, teachers and imams, who address students and people, should be equipped with up-to-date knowledge and training and should be supported to adopt attractive modern discourse, both in private and on public, a situation which remains inexistent yet.

Various prevention efforts and activities were initiated by religious institutions over recent years and attempts are being made to build the capacities of religious institutions and their staff in this regard. The King Abdullah II Institute for the Training and Rehabilitation of Preachers and Imams in Jordan aims to convey a modern message of peace and tolerance in Islam. The same experience is evident in the Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf where the training centre for imams aims to hone their skills and build their capacities to disseminate the

right moderate teachings of Islam as well as to combat terrorism and extremism. During my participation in a conference on „Reading the Islamic heritage between the guidelines of comprehension and the trivialities of delusion[5]" at the Faculty of Theology at Al-Azhar University, professors from Sharia and Islamic studies departments in Egypt, Iraq, Morocco and Saudi Arabia delivered lectures which promise good beginnings and develop new preventive strategies. In my contribution, I advised that missions outside the country should be intensified. I also advised expanding the criticism of the tendency to take the Holy Book (Quran) literally and critiquing the fundamentalist tendency in the religious discourse. I encountered opponents as well as enthusiastic supporters. The traditional religious ideological doctrine has been fractured, and it is necessary to work on promoting a religious jurisprudence compatible with modern lifestyles, and then develop a worldwide jurisprudence suitable for this age as well as the wider world, as other religions try to do, in particular Catholic and Protestant Christianity.

Nowadays, there are numerous calls for regional exchange of experience and lessons learned and working together on developing joint strategies to renew religious discourse, religious education, issuing of fatwas and general religious guidance. The cooperation between religious institutions in Arab countries has already begun; yet there is still a need to benefit from the experiences of institutions such as Al-Azhar and its observatory, Dar al-Iftaa in Jordan and other Islamic institutions, as well as an urgent need to build common strategies and approaches across the region.

In my capacity as an advisor to the Mufti of the Republic of Lebanon, I have been advocating for intensifying such dialogical attempts over the past few years. Under the Mufti's auspices, a process was initiated to increase the outreach of the religious lead institutions in Lebanon, for example by professionalising its media and web tools, to strengthen the dialogue capacities of its affiliated imams and to invest into the strategic development of Dar al-Fatwa, the religious institution representing the Sunni community at government level, to prevent radicalisation in the future. This process has been implemented with technical support and facilitation from Berghof Foundation since 2015.

With the election of Sheikh Abdel-Latif Deriane as Mufti in 2014, a window of opportunity had opened to strengthen and support the moderate line of thought, traditional to Sunni Islam in Lebanon. Opting for an inclusive and conciliatory approach, the Mufti strongly promoted the values of peaceful coexistence, pluralism and moderation as the religious leader of the Sunni community in Lebanon. Some of the main initiatives launched over the last few years include a process to strengthen the tools and capacities of religious media in promoting the moderate messages of Islam in an attempt to increase the attractiveness of the moderate discourse to the daily contexts of Dar al-Fatwa's constituencies. Lebanon has further benefited from enhancing exchanges with Dar al-Fatwa's counterparts at the regional level and renowned regional flagships such as the Egyptian Al-Azhar through conferences, continuous exchanges and occasional training for Dar al-Fatwa sheikhs.

Worth noting in this context are a conference held on the role of religious media in preventing extremism (https://bit.ly/2FfZQo4) to strengthen moderate Islamic discourse across the region, and a conference on strengthening the role of religious institutions in peace and dialogue processes (https://bit.ly/2JpSMjT). Further practical examples include training events for Dar al-Fatwa media personnel at Dar al-Ifta in Jordan and continuous workshops held in Lebanon with Dar al-Fatwa's media department and radio station. Various strategy-building processes have been initiated in key thematic areas for the prevention of extremism, including religious education methodologies and religious counselling of prisoners. Involving a wider range of representatives and experts in such dialogical strategy-building processes is key in order to ensure a broad support base for such initiatives, which cater to the diversity of voices in and around the religious lead institution as well as in the constituencies concerned. Based on this consideration and the crucial role of enhancing outreach and interaction with local communities, imams, sheikhs and personnel of religious institutions and organisations have received basic training in conflict transformation methodologies, dialogue facilitation and mediation.

---

5   For more information: https://bit.ly/2Hui7Nm

While these efforts have been important in laying some groundwork for intensifying the role and constructive potential of religious institutions in strengthening societal cohesion and taking a lead role in preventing extremism, much more needs to be done based on the ownership, capacities and genuine interest of the religious institutions and their leadership personnel. For these efforts to succeed, it is crucial that the lead religious institutions continue their efforts to rebuild trust with their constituencies, to take a bridge-building role between societies and state institutions and to invest in the capacities of their personnel and the young active members of the religious communities surrounding them. Concerted efforts of this kind will be crucial for fulfilling the guiding role of moderate Islam at the local, national and regional level to prevent a re-emergence of extremist groups over the decades to come.

6 Conclusion

The work of religious leaders alone is not sufficient to counter the challenges facing our religions and societies, no matter how far the efforts of religious institutions can go. As Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer stated, we need to join the efforts of intellectuals, media professionals, research institutes, academics and strategic studies centres. However, this paper focused on clarifying the crucial role of religious institutions as they continue to carry out four tasks: leadership of devotion, religious education, fatwa and general religious guidance. They are all necessary tasks in the process of modifying and widening the concepts and refuting dissidence and waves of extremism.

7 References and Further Reading

Abu-Nimer, Mohammed (2018). Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding, in: Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann (eds.) Transformative Approaches to Violent Extremism. Berghof Handbook Dialogue No. 13. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.

Al Sayed, Radwan (December 14, 2014). Religious Institutions Countering Extremism and Transforming Concepts (al-mo`assasat al-diniyya fi mowajahat al-tatarrof wa tahwilat al-mafahim). Al Ittihad. Retrieved from: https://bit.ly/2HYHjsb

Recommendations of Dar al-Fatwa's Conference on the Role of Religious Institutions (Tawsiyat mo`tamar Dar al-Fatwa 'an dawr al-mo`assasat al-diniyyi). (April 19, 2017). MTV Lebanon. Retrieved from: https://bit.ly/2qZbtEn

Rectifying Concepts (tasheeh al-mafahim). (December 3-4, 2014). From Al Azhar's International Conference to Counter Extremism and Terrorism. Al Azhar Al Sharif Islamic Research Academy (majma' al-bouhouth al-Islamiyya).

Maududi, Sayyid Abul A'la (1960). The Islamic Law and Constitution in: Khurshid Ahmad (ed), Islamic Publications Ltd, Lahore, Pakistan.

About the author

Radwan El-Sayed is professor of Islamic Studies at the Lebanese University since 1978. He was Director of the Arab Development Institute, Beirut (1982-1985); Chief Editor of the monthly magazine Arab Thought (1979- 1985); Director of the Islamic Studies Institute (1985-1988, 1994-2000); and co-editor of Al-Ijtihad Quarterly (1988-2004). Since the 1990s, he has been a visiting professor at a number of western universities, including: Salzburg University, Austria (1994); The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (1993, 1997); Chicago University (1994-1997); Harvard Law School (2002); and the University of Marburg, Germany (2003). His books include: *Nation, Group and Authority* (1984, 2011); *Concepts of Groups in Islam* (1985, 1993, 2011) *Contemporary Islam* (1987, 2011); *The Group, Society and the State* (1997, 2014); *Policies of Contemporary Islam* (1997, 2014); *The Struggle for Islam: Fundamentalism, Reform and International Policies* (2004, 2005, 2007, 2014); *A paper on Arab Political Reform* (2005, 2014); *German Orientalists* (2007, 2014); *Current Arab Issues* (2009); *Arabs and Iranians* (2014); *Arab Heritage in the Present* (2014); and *Times of Change: Religion, State and Political Islam* (2014).