Struggle Over Scripture: Charting the Rift Between Islamist Extremism and Mainstream Islam

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SUMMARY

Concerns about Islamist extremism are growing both in the West and in Muslim-majority countries as it continues to kill tens of thousands each year around the globe. Yet there is a deficiency in evidence-based research into how the supremacist ideology that drives this violence warps mainstream religious principles.

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There must be greater consensus among policymakers and thought leaders that the battle against the extremism of groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda is not against Islam, but rather against a perversion of the religion. This report aims to clarify the nature of that perversion, to enable a religiously grounded response to Islamist extremism, in both its violent and its nonviolent forms.

Over the past year, debates have reached fever pitch around elections in Europe and across the Atlantic. A growing climate of intolerance has spurred the conflation of extremist violence with issues such as national identity, refugee flows, and women's rights, with populist politicians using the threat of jihadism to justify an assault on the religious mainstream. While the mainstream is vocal, extremists, both Islamist and anti-Muslim, are often the voices that dominate the debate about the relationship between Islam and violence.

In such a climate, many do not draw the important ideological distinctions between a faith of 1.8 billion and a militant fringe, causing Muslims at large to be blamed for the activities of an extremist minority. ISIS talks of eradicating the grey zone of peaceful co-existence. Yet Muslims are the most numerous victims of Islamist violence globally, accounting for 90 per cent of all terrorism fatalities according to the US National Counterterrorism Center. Research should focus on building a nuanced picture of how extremist views can catalyse and legitimise violence. Only by understanding the nature of this perversion of religion can leaders hope to tackle the warped worldview behind the bloodshed.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Salafi-jihadi ideology is demonstrably distant from mainstream Islam.** There is a clear divergence from the mainstream in extremists' use of scripture and religious concepts. Only eight per cent of the 50 most quoted Quranic verses in Salafi-jihadi material were prevalent in mainstream texts. And while 86 per cent of Salafi-jihadis' main conceptual references were extreme in their interpretation, seven per cent of mainstream key themes had the potential to be interpreted through a violent lens.

- **Islamism is more ideologically aligned with Salafijihadism than with the mainstream.** Despite attempts by nonviolent Islamists to present themselves as part of the religious mainstream, there is a greater similarity between Islamists and violent extremists in how they use scripture, scholarship, and religious concepts in texts. Some 64 per cent of the top Quranic verses quoted by Salafi-jihadis are in common with those cited by Islamists, while there is only 12 per cent crossover between Islamists and the mainstream. Islamist content has notably more concepts in common with Salafi-jihadi texts than with mainstream ones. This chimes with previous research on the close ideological relationship between violent and nonviolent Islamist extremism, and the importance of countering both.

- **Counter-narratives are failing to contest in the right theological places.** Counter-narratives should be taking on the key arguments peddled by extremists. But only 16 per cent of the central scriptural references used by Salafi-jihadis to justify their actions are substantively addressed in the counter-narrative

content analysed. Some 40 per cent of the key ideological concepts of Salafi-jihadism are not prominently tackled in counternarratives. Key counter-messages are roughly split three ways between taking on extremists' religious arguments, condemning extremists as un-Islamic, and presenting peaceful Islamic alternatives. But such approaches largely fail to balance rebutting the false claims of extremists with providing compelling alternatives that reclaim religious discourse from Islamist and jihadi ideologues.

- **Islamist extremism is at odds with classical interpretations of Islam.** Islamist extremists claim to be restoring a glorious Islamic past, but their rhetoric is at odds with classical, premodern theological traditions of Islam. Salafi-jihadi texts have more in common with modern Quranic commentaries than with classical ones. Modern figures feature far more prominently in extremist literature than historical Islamic figures do, with twice as many contemporary jihadi ideologues mentioned as Islamic scholars. This is problematic for extremists (both Islamist and anti-Muslim) who claim Salafi-jihadism is the historically rooted true face of Islam.

- **Extremists quote scripture extensively, but selectively.** The Quran is quoted five times more often by Salafi-jihadis than in mainstream material, showing extremists' determination to root their ideology in religious garb. But their approach is characterised by cherry-picking that focuses on a small cluster of verses to affirm their ideological position. Some 89 per cent of the verses mentioned by Islamists, and 92 per cent in the Salafi-jihadi sample, are Medinan verses of the Quran that are more concerned with community issues than with personal piety, compared with only 76 per cent in the mainstream texts. The fact that extremists employ religious texts selectively to make their arguments can be used to undermine their claims of religious legitimacy.

- **Islamist extremism buries the significance of central Islamic practices.** The religious concepts prominent in extremist and mainstream texts are poles apart. While 'fasting,' 'prayers,' and 'preaching' are among the five most referenced concepts in mainstream content, they fail to appear in the top 30 ideas in Salafijihadi literature. Meanwhile, the concepts of 'mujahideen' and 'Islamic state,' the second and third most referenced ideas in

Salafi-jihadi texts (the first being 'jihad'), do not appear in the top 50 mainstream results, reflecting the contrasting priorities placed on Islamic thought and practice.

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