Religious Radicalism
The Challenges of an Ill-Defined Concept in Europe

After the events of 9/11[1], a complex set of concepts entered the political and societal discourse around violence motivated by *islamist or jihadist* ideology. Of course, these concepts were used in the past, but their meanings differed slightly from what they are today. Domestic terrorism has contributed to this trend as Western societies try to understand the factors and driving forces behind *jihadist* extremism.

This has been a difficult task indeed, as the analysis of the root causes of extremism has led governments to look beyond the traditional areas of criminal law, intelligence and law enforcement, as both prevention and security have been linked to the ultimate goal of tackling the root causes of violent religious radicalism. The fight against this violence has become a multi-faceted effort, embracing complex societal issues, such as integration, multiculturalism and social cohesion, all within a broader security agenda.

Today, this field of study is becoming increasingly important as all the researchers specialised in the field of Islam try to address the factors influencing extremism and to define in a clear and unambiguous way those terms that permeate the phenomenon of violence in the name of religion in general and Islam in particular.

Therefore, the issue of radicalisation as a concept has infused the political and media discourse in Europe in general and particularly in France over the last two decades. Today, the notion is widely used to grasp the phenomena of violence, while its relevance and legitimacy as a notion belonging to the security agenda remains rather controversial.

If we have to draw a short comparison with the Islamic context, we find that the notion of radicalisation is conveyed by two terms *al-taṭaruf*, extremism, *al-ġulū* excessiveness, excess, exaggeration, disproportion, and abuse. The word radicalisation, *al-radikalīa*, is a term that the Arabic language uses in a quite different context, related to intellectual and political thoughts that aim at a radical change and a comprehensive reform of the existing reality in various fields, whether it be political, economic and social. If radicalisation belong to the political field, the first two terms, *al-taṭaruf* and *al-ġulū*, are specifically used to describe extremist behaviour in the application of

[1] In a 2016 study, Rik Coolsaet points out that the concept of 'radicalisation' first appeared in a European Union working paper in May 2004. It refers to the trajectory that an individual undertakes in leaving his or her so-called "normal" state and moving towards the terrorist act. Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave. What drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic state? Insights from the Belgian case, Brussels, Egmont Institute, Egmont Paper81, March 2016. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/facing-the-fourth-foreign-fighters-wave/

religious precepts. Although often used interchangeably, these terms actually represent different shades of human thought and should therefore be used appropriately to avoid the risk of misunderstanding among the public, as well as to avoid stigmatising a particular religion as the only vector of violent ideologies.

Sharia law prohibits excessiveness and extremism in words, deeds and beliefs, and uses various methods and meanings to explain this; sometimes prohibiting it, sometimes warning against exaggeration, considering it as the cause of destruction. Surah 4: verse 17 says "O People of the Book! Do not go to extremes regarding your faith; say nothing about Allah except the truth" and surah 5, verse 77 "O People of the Book! Do not go to extremes in your faith beyond the truth, nor follow the vain desires of those who went astray before ˹you˺. They misled many and strayed from the Right Way".

Religious extremism, *al-ġulū* is one of those types of religious thinking that tends to be uncompromising about values, norms and practices against society and the world. In this sense, religious extremism, individually or collectively, is a ground for producing all means of negation and destruction.

The issue of religious extremism has been stirring the Arab world over the last 20 years. So far, several questions remain unanswered, including the connection between religious extremism and violent acts. Others, equally important questions are being raised. What is the typology of religious extremism in the world? Does religious extremism have socio-political conditions or religious intellectual and conceptual ones? What are the ideologies, concepts and interpretations from which extremists derive their perceptions and behaviour? What are the social, political and economic conditions that contribute to its production? Does religious education have a role in establishing concepts of religious extremism? How do the media and social networks contribute to spreading and sustaining religious extremism? Finally, what experiences do we have when religious extremism turns into a political struggle?

Religious extremism takes on a variety of expressions, powered by ideas and interpretations of the past and history, and is invoked at any time, in connection with political transformations, economic and social conditions and sectarian or racial motivation. Consequently, it has become a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced or explained by a single factor and can only be understood by looking at its different aspects, cultural, political, social and economic, and across various disciplines.

The link between Islam and violence, however, is nowadays seen in some Western circles as self-evident. For the last 20 years, *ǧihād*, in the Western imagination has represented the brutal nature of the morality of some Muslims aimed at bloodshed. Some argue that there is a culture in Islam that permanently opposes democracy and the West. These perceptions are often established through swift readings of *Qur'an*ic verses and Islamic tradition, which are perceived as incentives for a holy *ǧihād* against non-Muslims.

Consequently, Islam's real or supposed link to violence is a subject that is intertwined more than ever in ideological circles where two essentialist discourses confront each other in a continuous and unproductive dialogue. For some, Islam is fundamentally violent, aggressive or even totalitarian, and the proponents of this vision ground their arguments on the recent terrorist attacks targeting both Muslim and non-Muslim citizens in various parts of the world. The proponents of the *jihadist* ideology advocate armed *ǧihād* to fight the polytheists until they say, 'there is no god but Allah'[2]. Armed *ǧihād* is to be carried out until all lands are liberated from unbelievers and when all unbelievers submit to the rule of Islam (Khadduri, 1966, p. 16-17, as cited in Simbar, 2008, p. 58). By contrast, for others it is a form of spirituality and a message of peace. From the latter perspective, the reasons for violence in Islam may be exogenous: political (e.g. the Israeli-Arab conflict), cultural (e.g. rebellion against Western cultural colonialism) (Hentsch, 1988)[3] or even social (e.g. globalization, alienation and poverty) (Bar, 2004). However, the difficult question to be addressed is whether the Islamic tradition carries within it the seeds of violence and a narrative of extremism.

The theme of violence in the *Qur'an* is an interesting case study since many studies raise this issue through lexicons that convey extremely wide yet specific semantic fields. The different situations that involve violence are specified in the *Qur'an*ic text with precise terminology and refer to situations that imply violence as self-defence against acts of aggression.

In the Islamic context, the theologians of the Middle Ages considered the issue of violence within a specific paradigm that interrelates a community spirituality, a political project and a military strategy. The objective was to determine whether it was possible to organize the exercise of a central power in order to guarantee peaceful coexistence (*ṣalaḥ*)[4] within the Islamic community, without

[2] One of the five basic Tenets of the Islamic Faith. This declaration of faith, called the *shahada*, states, "There is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger."
[3] In *L'Orient Imaginaire,* Thierry Hentsch analyzes the paradigmatic change that occurred 200 years before 2001, with Bonaparte's 1798 expedition to Egypt marking a major turning point in East-West relations in the Mediterranean. This expedition was an abrupt manifestation of a long-term process of change. It was a military and cultural shock, injecting Western history and science into the heart of Mediterranean Islam. Hentsch, T. (1988). *L'Orient Imaginaire. La vision politique occidentale de l'Est méditerranéen*, Paris, *Les* Editions de Minuit, Collection Arguments.
[4] *ṣalaḥ* means, goodness and righteousness. *īṣlāḥīa* comes from the same root, meaning reformation, betterment, it has also the meaning of restoration and improvement. 'So fulfil the measure and weight and do not deprive people of their due and cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation. That is better for you, if you should be believers' (*Qur'an* 7:85),

transforming power into illegitimate violence (*ʿunf*). In this context, the concept of legitimate violence emerges from rules and regulations. The goals of the actions are directly linked to two dogmas: order and reconciliation (*īṣlāḥ*) in conformity with Islamic law.

Do the conditions in which we live today justify a return to violence in the name of Islam? If the answer is yes, then it is a matter for Muslims to dissect the reasons for violence, without dismissing a critical approach to the founding text, i.e. the *Qur'an*.

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January 2021