



RADICALIZATION: THE RELIGIOUS AND IDEOLOGICAL

Dr. Radwan Alsayyed

Lebanese thinker and researcher, Professor of Islamic Studies at the Lebanese University. King Faisal International Prize-winner for Islamic Studies 2017.

Etymologically, “radicalization” is a term originally translated or calqued from English, which means swerving from and veering off practice and ideology, drifting either right or left, while going beyond what is ideologically, politically, economically or socially common. In addition, western dictionaries and centers attach subtle nuances of religious denotations and connotations to the existing term, which has gained infamous prominence across the Arab, Islamic, cultural, political and religious circles since the 1970s. Radicalization per se now implies the underlying meaning of the term (exaggeration) as substantiated in the Holy Quran and Sunnah ﴿O, People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion, and do not say about God except the truth﴾ [The Women: 171]; ﴿Say, “O, People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion beyond the truth; and do not follow the opinions of people who went astray before, and misled many, and themselves strayed off the balanced way.﴾ [The Table: 77]. By the same token, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) preaches in his teachings: “Stave off exaggeration! The people whom you outlived perished given their exaggeration in religion”. In the same vein, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also preaches: “Some of you scare others off”; succinctly, they are those who think that by going too tough on people and on themselves, while remaining obdurate on religious issues, bringing about discomfort and hardship to those who disagree with them upon religious matters they unwittingly believe they do others a power of good; while, they are risibly scaring Muslims off.

WHY DID FUNDAMENTALISM OR RADICALIZATION SLIP INTO REALITY?

Radicalization per se was originally an accusation hurled by rulers of the West at their opponents amidst the internal communist or left-wing political opposition; however, after the rise of the right-wing currents in the wake of the First World War, the elected authorities used the term ‘radicalization’ to stigmatize the right-wing fascist parties

and trends to date. However, the Western authorities use different terms to describe issues relating to Islam.

Flicking through the ancient scriptures and replaying the dawn of Islam, exaggeration was used to signify two overarching meanings: first, the ideological distortion, by which the Holy Quran referred to the Christians living at the time who used to over-glorify Jesus Christ, Mary (Maryam bint Imrān), Ezra (Uzair) or other blessed personalities to a fault; second, taking acts of worship to extremes, or selectively cherry-picking textual chunks from the holy scriptures going from extreme to another, generating unbalanced behaviors that deviate from the true religion and veer off its limits, such as those who felt wildly independent of Messenger of God (peace be upon him), taking Islam to extremes; or those who accused Messenger of God (peace be upon him) of being unfair in dividing the spoils. To all such people, Messenger of God (peace be upon him) sends out his timely and clear warnings: “Make things easier, rather than difficult, and delight people rather than scare them off”; “Religion is very easy to understand and practice”; “It is no use going too tough and hard in one’s religion”. Simply put, exaggeration in the Muslim community at the time of Messenger of God (peace be upon him) was spearheaded in individual cases and did not snowball and balloon into a notorious phenomenon until late at the time of the Rashidun Caliphs. The first manifestation of radicalization or alternatively extremism was a deeply ingrained idea espoused by the first Arab secularists, which laconically means that religion and statehood should not work in tandem in order to establish the modern statehood. Farah Antoun, a Lebanese-born Egyptian citizen, drummed up for this idea in his magazine “Al-Jami’ah” 1902. “Verily, Ibn Khaldūn was true in his statement; ‘the defeated conquered is always fond of mimicking the winning conqueror’; you whimsically want to imitate France and the French regime, believing that it removed hierocracy through the French Revolution (1789), and Islam is not home to any priestly apparatus, nor can any country be ruled by priesthood and the rule in Islam is purely civil; the one flipping through the history of Islam understands that no such antagonism ever exists between religion and statehood”, came the witty retort by Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, Grand Mufti of Egypt.

As the twentieth century dawned, secularists along with Islamists welcomed the idea that translates: “Anyone with political power can get hold of everything.” Therefore, the two parties first sought covertly then overtly following the 1930s to reach power. Secularists sought to separate statehood from religion, as a precondition favorable and conducive for the establishment of a modern citizenship statehood and the new Islamist groups in Egypt and elsewhere to gain power to fight colonialism, realize a new citizenship alienated statehood and re-establish the Islamist rule and to

implement Sharia and to realize Caliphate-Statehood.

The first radicalization we always suffer from is the distortion of our religion, which infamously rife in our religion before it is so in our countries; it is the distortion of religion as highlighted by the Holy Quran and the heavenly religions. To put it succinctly, by 'the distortion of religion' I mean politicizing religion, or making it a political and partisan ideology instrumentalized by Hassan Al-Banna, Al-Mawdudi and Qutb. By the same token, Khomeini and Khamenei and their peers use Shiism. They have the guardianship of the jurist, and political Islam groups have the mentor!

The other manifestation of exaggeration highlighted by Prophet's teachings, which tenaciously cherry-picks and clings onto the surface of the scriptures selectively, turning a blind eye to the underlying meaning intended, causing denial and excommunication and fueling hostility to Muslims and the entire world, has root causes that are different from first manifestation of exaggeration triggered by deviation and distortion.

Modernity hand in glove with globalization turned commonly established concepts of humanity upside down, flung out of religions and ethics. The insecurity creeping over the general public in all religions and cultures, including Islam, has brought about radical and revolutionary propensities demonstrated in fashion, food and religious rituals, bulldozing people to adopt new methods to be embedded into the existing traditions.

Following the 1970s in the Muslim world, the two types of radicalization converged into one point: the distortion-based radicalization seeking to establish a statehood in the name of religion, and the purgatory radicalization of identity aiming at sabotaging what globalization brought about across the Muslim world, and when possible it seeks to strike the mastermind of global disbelief. The first radicalization used the other radicalization with two meanings: the sabotage of the modern citizenship statehoods in our countries paves the way for the establishment of the statehood of political Islam on the one hand, and the other meaning is that the identity-based or jihadist radicalization that the whole world is confronting in the name of fighting terrorism will turn the attention of the world to the fact that political Islam and affiliated currents are not violent.

Islam has greatly suffered from the two types of fundamentalism or radicalization, bringing about much harm to its beliefs, principles, concepts, values, people, property and funds, and the vision of the world. Two notable schisms took place: an ideological, political, and conceptual schism, and a terrorist schism that nicknamed

itself jihadism. Arabs in tandem with other Muslims and the entire world have fought defection and violent and terrorist rebellion. This purgatory militancy will not come to an end; however, given its ferocity and violence it will not remain a threat to the future of religion and the statehood.

Our scholars and religious and cultural institutions have had no options other than a holistic confrontation with these two murderous types of radicalization. In my research, I have called the two confrontational steps as qualification and rehabilitation. As for qualification, it was represented by criticizing the distorted concepts of religion, jihad, Sharia, faith and disbelief, the statehood and its relations with religions, cultures, variables and the world. In my *The Struggle against Islam* (2004), I explain that “It is a struggle to arrest the core zeitgeist of religion and its audiences across three sides: extremists of both types, international parties and their policies, and the think tanks, polymaths, scholars, subject-matter pundits, clergymen, literati, intelligentsia and the public opinion. Our scholars and institutions are entrusted with five tasks: preserving unity of belief and worship, informed fatwa, renewed religious education, advanced public guidance, and other visions of the world.

These qualifications included research studies, supported by statements, data, documents, conferences, training institutions for imams and teachers, and renewed relations with the world’s religions and cultures. There is still a failure in the renewed approach to our youth and audience. Also, scholars and institutions in the Arab world do not have close cooperation and joint programs for meeting, solidarity to learn from best practices, experiences and lessons. I have published a book featuring *Politics of Religion in Times of Change* (2014).

The article, *Radicalization Swinging Around Religion and Ideology*, seeks to classify one of the Arab and Muslim intellectuals as extremists; however, they fall into two categories: the group that does not consider scholars and institutions with capabilities in renewal and advancement, and that category still swings into secularism and globalization, and the other category that stands with political Islam (and the majority of these are former communists) once because Islam in the past and the present is oppressed by the conspiring West, and once again because they constitute a “resistance” to the western colonizers and Israel, even if they return by virtue of the Iranians, the Turks, and the Americans, or playing around in their hands. The two groups really practice ideological radicalization.

Qualifications based on knowledge, insight and management are ongoing, but we are

now entering the core of qualification process. Diligence is no longer sufficient. Rather, it is necessary to go through the process of renewal. Paul Ricoeur remarks that religious scriptures have vast interpretative possibilities, and through which we enter into three things: the general moral intentions of religion, the values of mercy, known within the Muslim world and with humanity, and insistence on combating the conversion of religion into a political ideology, in theory and practice.

Three priorities remain for all of us as politicians, scholars and intellectuals to combat extremism: restoring tranquility in religion, rescuing the experience of the citizenship statehood and associated renewal, and redressing the relationship with the world.