CHAPTER 2

The Rise of Religious Extremism in the Middle East: A Triptych View?

Abstract This chapter explores why religious extremist is on the rise in the Middle East. It highlights how the Salafi's textualization of faith has inadvertently enabled theocratic regimes to cement their dictatorships; creating a state of "religious cronyism"; before concluding that encouraging uncompromised adaptation of Sharia law cements the position of otherwise corrupted rulers. This chapter also discusses the interrelation between financing jihad and tax evasion. It finally explores how Salafi-Jihadist have succeeded in mischaracterizing criticism leveled against their violent means to achieve their political agenda as an attack on Islam per se; creating a form of "religious dilution."

Keywords Sharia law · Religious TV stations · Political suppression Financing Jihad

This chapter seeks to answer the question of why extreme groups are on the rise in the Middle East. To this end, first, we investigate the interlink between Salafism and autocracy, highlighting the role of autocracies and theocracies in fueling extremism in the Middle East. Second, we examine how tax evasion is used as a mechanism to funding Jihad. Finally, we briefly assess the viability of religious extreme speech as a business model.

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Salafism as a Form of Political Suppression

Various findings in this book suggest a range of answers to the question of why radical groups are on the rise. A chief amongest them is the historic tension between Sunni and Shia[1]—a toxic point that so far has made it easier for extreme sub-state groups to rally support for their cause. The tension between Shia and Sunni has increasingly become a noticeable destabilizing force in the Middle East, particularly in the aftermath of the Syrian cataclysm—the result of which has led to record a number of people displaced from their homes due to conflicts and persecution on political and/or religious grounds. Utilizing the power of social media, the conflict in Syria and Iraq has handed a golden opportunity to all types of extreme organizations to leverage the age-old tension between Sunni and Shia to their own political advantage, seriously pushing the European Union, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey to their limits.[2]

In this space, however, we limit our discussion to the following query: All considered, it is fair to argue that the Salafi Jihadist Movement clearly represents an unpopular and violent interpretation of faith, why then is it thriving? While there might not be one concrete answer to that question, one thing is clear: Autocratic regimes play a role in fueling extremism. Next we explain how and why.

As discussed above, one of the most notable aspects of the Salafi Jihadist Movement's ideology is the literal interpretation of faith. By relying on carefully selected verses of the Quran of hadith, textualization of faith is used as a principle to justify violence against other subgroups. The question to be raised here is why political establishments in the Middle East put up with such a clearly questionable school of thought? The answer is that the very same concept that makes Salafi Movement, at least in some people's view controversial, namely the literal interpretation of faith, does in fact, inadvertently, serve the interests of the autocratic elite in the Middle East. The stricter the interpretation of Sharia law is, the more stable autocratic regimes will be.

To understand the link between Salafism and autocracy, one has to pay regards to one of the Islamic concepts which has rarely been discussed in the context of religious extremist, namely the principle of "obedience" (the obligation to obey the Muslim ruler). According to the Quran,[3] Muslims must follow and submit to their leader so long as he rules according to Islamic law. The Muslim ruler is entitled to the advice and support of his people if/when needed.[4] A strict interpretation of this

religious mandate makes it very difficult for Muslims to rise against a corrupted dictator (ruler) so long as he is a dedicated Muslim.

According to Taymiyyah, the Muslim leader, who might be a prince or a Muslim cleric,[5] owes his followers absolute loyalty.[6] So long as he does not violate God's orders, such as preventing his follow citizens from praying or fasting, they must not rebel against him.[7] This principle also applies even when the leader serves his own interests—as appose to serving the community at large.[8] The fact that the Muslim leader does not serve justice and treats his people unfairly does not justify violent rebellion against him.[9] A corrupted, yet an ideologically dedicated leader, is not to be opposed using violent means.[10] Those who rise against a Muslim ruler die as infidels, Taymiyyah argued.[11] Put differently, a Muslim may advise or criticize his leader but he may not go as far as revolting against him.[12]

The Salafi's textualization of faith has inadvertently enabled theocratic and autocratic regimes to cement their dictatorships in the Middle East, creating a state of "religious cronyism," where appointed clerics bolster the dictator's otherwise illegitimate reign by depicting him as a "faithful," and thus forcing Muslims to obey him.[13] In this particular context, both Salafism and autocracies work hand in hand to secure the submission of otherwise rebellious population.[14] This is where a strict interpretation of faith becomes handy. A rigid interpretation of the "obedience" principle means that a dedicated Muslim cannot revolt against his/her corrupted Muslim ruler without running the risk of being branded as unbeliever. From this perspective, among other issues and keeping the obedience doctrine in mind, encouraging a strict literal and uncompromised adaptation of Sharia law, inadvertently, cements the position of otherwise corrupted rulers.

Citing Taymiyyah and hadiths by the Prophet Mohammad,[15] a prominent Salafi scholar, made it clear that a Muslim might revolt against his ruler upon two high threshold conditions: first, where the ruler clearly and "publicly" renounces Islam; second, where rebellions can demonstrably prove that they have enough power and public support to oust the ruler, and thus, are capable of establishing peace and stability.[16] Absent of these two threshold conditions, it is in the interest of the Islamic nation not to revolt against the ruler.[17] Offenders are to be killed, whoever they are.[18]

To cement their otherwise illegitimate reign therefore, despite their public disapproval of a strict interpretation of faith, autocracies, and

theocracies in the Middle East take the privilege of "absolute obedience" seriously. For autocracies and theocracies alike, the radical organizations' strict and literal interpretation of faith acts as an insurance policy. It shields them against the fury of their deprived and disfranchised population. This, in part, explains why the political establishments in the Middle East, to a varying degree, tolerate extreme groups that do not directly challenge their reign.

Extreme Speech and Tax Evasion?

How extreme groups finance their activities is a question of great significance. In addition to other sources of income, does Salafi Jihadism provide extreme groups with a sustainable and legitimate source of cash?

The Quran encourages Muslims to spend their money for the "sake of Allah."[19] It explains in detail how tax money should be spent, providing a list of eight categories of personal and activities that tax payers' money should be spent on, including the "poor," the "needy," and spending for the sake of Allah.[20] While there is no straight rule as to when financing Jihad becomes a religious mandate, the conventional wisdom is that once a prominent Muslim cleric(s) calls for Jihad, supporting the Mujahedeen with all possible means becomes a religious mandate.[21] In special cases, funding Jihad trumps other necessities.[22] Examples include where Muslim fighters (Mujahedeen) are besieged or underfunded.[23] In these cases, Muslim fighters are deemed poor, and, thus, helping them financially or otherwise becomes an absolute priority.[24] Under such circumstances, many Muslims may choose not to pay taxes to their government.[25] Instead, they may pay directly to the Mujahedeen, often using private channels.[26] Consensus as to who has the right to declare Jihad in a given community is hard to come by. Whose opinions are relevant for Jihad is a question that is still relevant to most ideologically driven groups. Does the scholar of a small community have the right to declare Jihad against a given enemy or a group of people as is currently the case in many areas of Syria? Is there a minimum number of scholars required to declare Jihad, as happened in Cairo in 2012 where roughly 500 scholars declared Jihad against the Syrian regime? Do the scholars of the Islamic State have the right to unilaterally declare Jihad? There is no straightforward answer to any of these questions. What is clear however is that by declaring Jihad and thus evoking the religious duties

of Muslims to help finance Mujahedeen, most extreme groups have so far managed to stay afloat.[27]

Monetizing Jihad: Extreme Speech as a Business Model?

Religion plays a pivotal role in peoples' lives in the Middle East. Ideologically driven groups, such as Fateh al-Sham and the Islamic State, have to compete in a consumer marketplace with a myriad of other Islamic groups. The proponents of the al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya Movement seem to appreciate and significance of "religious branding."[28] As a group with a clear political agenda,[29] Salafists realize the need for a moto to sure up their base. By systemically and meticulously linking their activities to verses of the Quran or hadith of the Prophet, Salafi-Jihadists have succeeded in characterizing criticism leveled against their agenda as an attack on Islam and Muslims per se and thus to rally huge crowed.[30] The self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate's slogan "lasting and expanding,"[31] concisely sums up this effective survival strategy. Radical Jihadists have long justified their own politically driven goals using carefully selected metaphoric verses of the Quran or hadiths of the Prophet.[32] This form of "religious dilution"[33] has already reflected adversely upon Muslims well beyond the shores of the Middle East.[34]

Al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya is a very powerful brand that enjoys the free publicity of a significant number of religious TV stations. The latter is a notable factor given that roughly 28% of all TV programs in the Middle East show religious themes.[35] Religious TV shows are a lucrative source of income. With the help of social media platforms,[36] a modest religious station could easily survive and profit. So much so that in a four-year window (2009–2013), the number of religious TV stations tripled.[37] A significant number of these stations adhere to the austere Wahhabist creed,[38] and most of them are lightly regulated and are privately funded,[39] giving them the opportunity to host some Salafi clerics who cite Taymiyyah's fatwas to justify or encourage hostility toward other subgroups[40]; using the current Syrian civil war and the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime against its own people to support radical Jihadists by depicting the Syrian calamity as "Jihad" and, thus, a religious mandate.[41]

Due to mostly political reasons, many Salafi scholars and religious TV stations oppose the political aspiration of ISIS, where the followers of the Islamic State are usually referred to as "Khawarij" (a group of ultra-Muslims).[42] Still, the bulk of podcasted materials on those stations provide

the ideological backbone for the Islamic State and its supporters.[43] Such free support intentionally or inadvertently helps lend legitimacy to the Islamic State and like-minded groups legitimacy that makes it easier for those groups to persist, to recruit members, and to raise funds, all of which facilitate more terrorist attacks.

Notes

1. Other examples include political and economic corruption, lack of justice, regime change agendas which have led to a vacuum of power in many areas of the Middle East; only to be replaced by extreme organization's supporters, general animosity towards the West and media bias which may have played a role in aggregating tension between the Middle East and the West.
2. According to the UN Refugee Agency, the number of registered Syrian refugees has reached 4,861,112 as of November 2016- in addition to 8.7 million predicted to be displaced inside Syria, http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html.
3. The Quran, Surah Alnisa, verse 59 states "… obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you…."
4. Ibid.
5. Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah bin Baz, the former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, available at http://www.binbaz.org.sa/article/208.
6. Abdur-Rahman, at 13–14.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., at 9.
9. Id., 13–14.
10. Ib., 13–14.
11. Id., 11–12.
12. Ibid., 10–14.
13. Ammar and Xu (supra note 13), at 244.
14. Ibid.
15. For instance, one of the Prophet's sayings goes: "…It is obligatory upon the Muslim to listen to and obey [the ruler] in his adversity and prosperity, in pleasure and displeasure, unless the Muslim is ordered to commit a sin…".
16. Abdul Aziz, http://www.binbaz.org.sa/article/208.
17. Ibid.
18. Id.
19. The Quran, Surah Al-Taubah, verses 41 reads "… Go forth, light or heavy, and strive with your wealth and your lives in the course of Allah. That is best for you, if only you knew".
20. The Quran, Al-Taubah, verses 60 reads: "The alms are only for poor and the needy, and for those employed in connection therewith, and for those

whose hearts are to be reconciled, and for the freeing of slaves, and for those in debt, and for the cause of Allah, and for the wayfarer-an ordinance from Allah". Emphasis added. Zakat is 2.5% of a year's total cumulative wealth, available at, http://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/zakat/zakat-faqs/.

21. See generally *Surah Al-Tawbah* 9:38, https://quran.com/9:38 (last visited January 6, 2017) (discussing adhering to the cause of Allah).
22. See generally *Surah Al-Baqarah* 2:195, https://quran.com/2:195 (last visited Jan. 6, 2017) (discussing spending in the cause of Allah to Jihad).
23. See generally *Surah An-Nisa* 4:95, https://quran.com/4:95 (last visited January 6, 2017) (discussing rewards given to those who fight for the cause of Allah).
24. Network News Sure 2, *Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, Syria is a State, Major General Jihad and the Worship of Money and Weapons*, YOUTUBE (May 26, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00nWtCWtz4c (in Syria, a number of Salafi-Jihadi clerics called for support for the Jihad. In this video, Hazem Abo Ismail stated that "while collecting money [for Syrians] for weapons, drugs, and food is, no doubt, part of one's religious duties, this should not be an excuse . . . not to do our real duties. As the companions of the Prophet did it before, we ought to pay our money to work and to wage Jihad as well."); HamzaBakour Channel, *Urgent: Qaradawi Declares Jihad in Syria, #Duty* [sic], YOUTUBE (March 4, 2012), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2LxmoMV20M [hereinafter *Qaradawi*] (Yousef Al Qaradawi said that "the case to fight the Syrian regime is beyond question, and Syrian religious clerics should publicly declare their positions regarding that issue.").
25. See M. HASSAN KAKAR, AFGHANISTAN: THE SOVIET INVASION AND THE AFGHAN RESPONSE, 1979–1982, at 127–128 (the Regents of the University of California 1995) (referencing the priority of providing financial assistance to the Mujahedeen).
26. Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition, INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP 9 (October 12, 2012), https://www.ciaonet.org/catalog/26471 [hereinafter INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP] (addressing the competitive advantage afforded to Salafi-Jihadi groups, who receive private funding).
27. Ammar and Xu (supra note 13), at 248. See also, Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition, INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP 9 (Oct. 12, 2012), https://www.ciaonet.org/catalog/26471 [hereinafter International Crisis Group] (addressing the competitive advantage afforded to Salafi-Jihadi groups, who receive private funding).
28. See generally MARA EINSTEIN, BRANDS OF FAITH: MARKETING RELIGION IN A COMMERCIAL AGE 13, 57 (Routledge 2008), http://culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/pdf/research/books/nation_branding/

Brands_Of_Faith_-_Mara_Einstein.pdf (discussing the branding of religions to reach new consumers).

29. The agenda of Jihadi groups is to establish an Islamic state, as clearly seen in their literature. See *What is Jihadism*, BBC NEWS (December 11, 2014), http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30411519 (discussing the Jihadist mission).
30. Ammar and Xu (supra note 13), at 248.
31. See generally Lina Khatib, *The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding*, Carnegie Endowment for Int'l Peace (June 29, 2015), http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/29/islamic-state-s-strategy-lasting-and-expanding-pub-60511.
32. See Husain Haqqani, *Prophecy & the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent*, Hudson Institute (March 27, 2015), http://www.hudson.org/research/11167-prophecy-the-jihad-in-the-indian-subcontinent (noting that radical Islamists invoke the hadiths of the Prophet).
33. Ammar and Xu (supra note 13), at 252.
34. See generally ARIF KEMIL ABDULLAH, The Qur'an and Normative Religious Pluralism: A Thematic Study of the Qur'an 152 (The International Institute of Islamic Thought 2014) (discussing the use of religion as a form of political gain).
35. *Religious Channels Fueling the Conflict in the Middle East*, Al-Masdar (May 2, 2015) (arguing that there are around 100 religious channels that fuel sectarianism in the Middle East).
36. Most of these Salafi-Jihadi-leaning channels maintain a strong presence on social media, *See* Ammar and Xu (supra note 13), at 251.
37. Id.
38. See Ammar and Xu (supra note 13), at 251, discussing the popularity of religious programming in the Middle East.
39. *Religious Channels Fueling the Conflict in the Middle East*, supra note 35.
40. *Sheikh Mohamad Alzobee*, Al Khalidjia TV (May 19, 2009), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqmIcn3AStU (arguing that "Alnyseria are unbelievers… anyone who doubts that they are unbelievers is an unbeliever like them.").
41. *HamzaBakour Channel, Urgent: Qaradawi Declares Jihad in Syria, #Duty [sic], YOUTUBE (Mar. 4, 2012),* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2LxmoMV20M *[hereinafter Qaradawi] (Yousef Al Qaradawi said that "the case to fight the Syrian regime is beyond question, and Syrian religious clerics should publicly declare their positions regarding that issue.").*
42. For information about the meaning of this term, see Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah bin Baz, the former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, available at http://www.binbaz.org.sa/noor/11822.
43. Ammar and Xu (supra note 13), at 245.

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