

How Can We Detect Extremist (Islamic Inspired) Discourse and How to Tackle It?

AVERA – COMMENTARY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Following the string of terror attacks in Europe and other parts of the world many countries, one of the strategies local and supra-local authorities have been focusing on as part of their prevention strategy ¹, is to put in place an early detection system to signal signs of radicalism and violent extremism (VE) as occurring for example in the discourse taking place in cultural associations, sport clubs, educational institutions, mosques etc.

In this article we want to focus on how to recognize such extremism discourse by contrasting it to a moderate view. Apart from its use for intelligence gathering, being able to understand the slippery slope towards Islamic radicalism is also key to developing educational programs in schools, mosques and the media to counter the narrative in an early stage.

As BIC our observation is that much more can and should be done in this particular area. This in particular the case towards the younger population in Europe, which according to the UN those under 24 making up 40% of the world population, and

¹ <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/vlaams-beleid-actieplan-radicalisering>

those between the age 15 to 24 accounting for 16 per cent (1.2 billion people) ². Youngsters are still very easy to imprint with dogma and don't have the ability and/or life experience yet to discern between religious teachings in itself and the distortions made for political gain and influence.

While governments have mainly focused on short-term and reactive strategies, as BIC we advocate a long-term strategy of developing and institutionalizing a counter narrative for radical and extremism discourse.

An example of reactive thinking was a 23 million Euro investment made by the Belgian government in a search engine to scan the internet for potential extremism discourse and threats in 2016 following the terrorist attacks in Brussels. However less than 5 years later during an interview with *Le Soir* and *Knack* on 25 February, the head of the General Intelligence and Security Service (SGRS), Philippe Boucké, stated that the software did not match expectations and is no longer being used by the Belgian military intelligence ³.

We can't help but think that this investment could have gone a long way in the implementation of counter-narrative and educational programs, working complementary with intelligence gathering and threat assessment.

WHAT IS A DISCOURSE?

A discourse refers to the exchange of ideas and knowledge through language and symbols, coalescing around certain underlying beliefs, opinions, theories, topics, world-views and other that are being held. It is framework of signification, or "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena " (Rein and Schön 1993, Zwanikken 2001: 43, Hajer 1995: 44).

Since those are for most people often implicit, unformalized and unstructured, discourses often hold a lot of ambiguity and even controversy. This ambiguity in turn gives rise to struggle and discussion (Van Twist 1994) ⁴. The concept of discourse as such stands for 'language as a form of action', as if one is testing the power,

² U.N. Worldyouthreport-2030 Agenda. New York, 2018.

³ www.sgrs.be

⁴ Van de Arend S.H. Discouranalyse, de micro –en macroanalyse van taalgebruik, Hoofdstuk 2, <https://dSPACE.library.uu.nl/bitstream/1874/23553/3/c2.pdf>

strengths and limits of its own understanding, believes, world-views, etc. in discussion with and in order to convince others.

An analysis of a discourse therefore provides insights into the predominate world-view and believes that underlies one's thinking; the tensions (or incompatibilities) with those of others and/or society; and the strength of one's convictions, i.e. how well ideas are already embedded in one's mental framework and supported by observations, experiences, theories, believes, significant others.

MODERATE RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE VERSUS EXTREMIST RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

The essence of the difference between a moderate versus an extremist religious discourse can be found in its definition. Etymological the word religion goes back to the Latin word "religare", which means to bind fast (to rely), i.e. to connect people through their common bond and dependency on and obligation towards something that is shared in common. From an Islam perspective we are all created by God through His image and with a particular pupose. Religion is therefore a system that can unite all of humankind in harmony with each-other and creation, this through an understanding of Reality and the place of humankind in it on the one hand, and the development of one's full potential in alignment with that on the other hand.

The second word "moderate" finds its origin in "moderatus" which means "within bounds, modest, restraint, keep within measures" and "not excessive in amount, intensity, quality, etc.", which are all much praised character traits in the Quran and other Islamic sources.

In other words, every discourse that is focused on division, hatred, violence, exclusivity, arrogance, excess, fear etc., is not compatible with the spirit of Islam and religion. The moderate discourse in contrast is focused on promoting and cultivating hope and effort towards harmony, peace, justice, salvation; developing oneself as a disciplined and virtuous person striving for Truth (a truth that can be found everywhere, with everyone and in through different ways of seeking knowledge and truth); and a detachment from egocentric worldly power and material possessions.

The current tension between moderate and extremism Islam finds its roots in what is the legitimacy of the (human) interpretation of the basic Islamic sources (Esposito.1998: 116). Orthodox discourse often equates Islam to jurisprudence. Its focus is on reconstructing the world to fit within their narrow interpretation: an interpretation that is not only limited to a specific conformity with the letter-of-the-law instead of the spirit-of-the-law but, even more importantly, limited within a certain historical and cultural context.

Moderate Islam takes all those points into consideration as part of an integration in a much bigger picture which includes the rich philosophical and spiritual traditions of Islam (which today again are receiving a lot of intellectual interest and attention also from non-Muslims), cultural traditions with their cultural diversity of practising Islam (within certain parameters such as the 5 pillars) and the specific situation, challenges and opportunities of 21st century society.

In the modern Islamic discourse there is a lot of diversity in thinking and ideas with an openness towards an inclusive world-view and with no discrimination based on race, colour, gender or religion. Though there are important differences between an Islamic world-view and Western ideology, it is understood they are not inherently incompatible, with more similarities than differences and with a common past and future, especially in the light of global 21st century challenges.

However, given that this process of reflection and renewal is in full swing with a diversity of voices and ideas still shaping the discourse, extremists and radical groups have the advantage of a populist discourse that promises instant black & white solutions, especially for those who face injustices and hardship. Again, it points to the importance of quality education that focuses not only on dogmatic theological aspects but also on critical thinking, philosophical world-views, spirituality all framed within the context of the 21st century.

RECOGNIZING EXTREMIST ISLAMIC DISCOURSE

With above framework in mind it is even for a layperson relative easy to spot extremist thinking and speech. Among some of its characteristics are:

- A discourse rooted in emotions and personal emotions, avoiding rational and scientific based arguments and discussions

- A revisionistic world-view, reinterpreting history, facts, events and sources to fit a narrow and biased ideology
- Black&white thinking, where everyone and everything that does not fit with a certain thinking/interpretation is considered wrong, excluded and/or opposed
- A fanatical attitude of moral superiority, arrogance and self-infatuation
- The believe of having a monopoly on absolute truth
- A focus on exclusivity, division, sectarianism and separatism
- The closed-mindedness stirring up of polemics, polarisation, hatred and violence
- A deliberately ignoring of some key principles of Islam such as justice, equality, freedom, peace, knowledge
- The fixation on form over meaning

Moreover the extremism discourse is self-centred focusing on recruiting and mobilisation of people, prioritising a personal and political agenda and goals over that of the wellbeing, care, teaching and guidance of the Muslim in this search for meaning, truth, felicity and salvation. Therefore they have no choice to resort to propaganda, indoctrination, secrecy, double-speak, manipulations and emotions, revealing a behaviouristic pattern of narcissism.

It is exactly the ability to manipulate others into a distorted view of Islam and Reality that is rewarded in radical groups and organizations and what makes them so dangerous. And since distortion thrives by blurring lines between truth and falsehood and inciting polarisation, conflicts and emotions, it is only beneficial to hinder common ground, dialogue, dialectic, rational discourse and even truth itself.

CUTTING OFF EXTREMISM AT ITS ROOTS

As can't be stressed enough, to cut off radical Islam at its roots requires education, knowledge, critical thinking etc. within a wider view of society and Reality. Such an education needs to happen from several different complementary angles and customized towards different audiences and different media.

A clear priority should be given to Muslim youngsters in Europe, given that they are not only easier to influence (in one way or another) but also they have been specifically targetted by extreme groups, with over 5000 European youngster joining IS in Syria over the last years.

Thereby it is key to understand the sophistication of the propaganda machines deployed with extremist groups such as Islam, and the ability they have to associate past and current (perceived and real) conflicts and injustices (in particular with disenfranchised youngsters looking for self-identify and meaning) with a systematic assault of evil and amorality on Muslims and Islam itself. Once a new self-identify (based on association with people who feel life is unfair and unjust), dichotomous world-view (oppressors and liberators) and meaning (fight for justice against oppressors for a new homestead where they can decide) is created, it is relatively easy to influence their behaviour for nefarious means.

The current initiatives and projects, whether on a national or European level, are in our opinion not sufficient since they often start from a normative and fixed European world-view that focusses predominantly on conformity rather than addressing the issues of world-view, self-identity and meaning at its core that many Muslims find hard to unite with their daily life experiences, observations and biased understanding of Islam.

As BIC we have offered, and will keep on offering, several alternative and complementary ideas. Roughly seen they fall in a couple of different categories.

First and foremost we must offer a galvanising and inspiring alternative to rally people away from radical Islam and extremism and towards an inclusive project that brings not only Muslims together but the whole world.

An important point being stressed is that there is no ideology, no country, no union or alliance that is able to solve many of the contemporary challenges the world is facing today. Because many of those challenges and tensions remains structural unaddressed we can expect more conflict, extremism, radical and violent behaviour, not only from Muslims, but also from left- and right-wing extremism, climate and social activism etc. in the years to come. Therefore the development of a common (or at least compatible) world-view and project between Western secular ideology and an Islamic teleology (not to be confused with theological), - harmonizing

enlightenment, material and technological progress with a search for meaning, purpose and peace, and from a scientific point of view a reductionistic approach with a holistic -, would be a giant step forward. As BIC we have developed several ideas and concepts for this purpose.

Second, and closely linked with the above, is the development of a common values-framework. A simple example is the “golden rule”, found back in virtual all religions and philosophies of life but that is notorious absent in extreme ideologies. There are also common values in the search for well-being and well-fare, with progressive insights of how to define and achieve those without creation imbalances, disharmony and externalities with others or with nature, but till today with no definitive answers. An interesting initiative in this regard is the Values V20, aiming at understanding difference in values among the G20, or the Quranic values-analysis we conducted a few years back. Also here we have argued before that there are no incompatibilities between western secular and Islamic values, rather on the contrary. This includes values related to western style secular democracy and institutions. It is all too easy to forget that throughout the majority of Islamic history – in particular in Sunni-Islam – there has been a split between political, theological, intellectual and spiritual power and influences.

Third there is the need for creating explicit awareness of the what, who, and why of the differences between the discourses of radical and moderate Islam from a very early age on, including a profound understanding how radical ideologies give Islamic concepts non-Islamic meanings. Theologians could for example develop a lexicon of concepts and behaviour with an overview of how they can be diverted and perverted for personal or political gain that subsequently can be used for educational purposes at school, Imam-training, but also to raise general awareness in society. We have provided some examples of this in our article about the Muslim Brotherhood.

Fourth we must encourage critical thinking in general and in specific regarding Islam and equip students and scholars with theories of how to read and interpret the Islamic holy texts in the hermeneutic tradition of intellectual giants such as Aristotle and Descartes. The latter, in his book “Methodology of Discourse”⁵, argues against blind imitation and acceptance of ideas without argumentation. Discourse analysis is also part of the Islamic tradition with scholars as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, al-

5 Renault Laurence, *Décartes René, discours de la méthode*, Flammarion ; Paris, 2016.

Juwayni, al-Walid Ibn al-Baji al-Andalusi, Ibn Hazm, al-Razi, Ibn Rushd contributing to it in various degrees.

Fifth the whole Islamic discourse must again be placed within the bigger context of what has always been a humane discourse about the role of humanity in the cosmos, guidance, truth and mercy. Islam is far broader than shariah, and shariah is not the essence of it, nor an authoritarian and unalterable system of suppress women and enforce morality. A limitation of Islam to such a view is mainly telling of the restricted and repressed self-image of those who advocate it.

Sixth, besides the range of existing translations, there is an urgent need for a contemporary exegesis (Tafsir), and maybe also translation, within a European context that can provide meaning, purpose and guidance of the Quranic message and world-view within the 21st century. What does patience, steadfastness, strive against the ego, charity, fairness, compassion, generosity and others mean within a European secular society? What does Islam say about politics, economy, the environment, leadership etc. that is relevant for today to improve society or solve current issues? What are good ambitions and what are not? And how does Islam tell us to deal with differences, tensions, conflicts but also set-backs and good fortune, gain and loss, positions of power and membership? The challenge, therefore, is to use a broad set of tools and a contemporary, scientific mindset to interpret the Quran correctly and develop a Quranic exegesis that combines eternal wisdom and truth with a contemporary humane vision. Only this can lead to a balanced discourse while simply unmask the extreme discourse of terrorist organisations among the youth.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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