Africa and the Growth of Violent Radicalization in the Name of Islam: The Need for a Doctrine Revision Approach

Amr Abdalla

Executive Summary

The fourth Tana Forum focused on the topic of Secularism and Politicized Faith. The Forum was preceded two weeks earlier by the horrific massacre of university students in Kenya by violent Muslim radicals and ended just when innocent Ethiopian workers in Libya were slaughtered by ISIL terrorists. It then has been followed in the last few weeks by more violent terrorist attacks. The continuation of violence in the name of Islam in Africa and beyond confirms the urgency to develop policies and actions to counter the waves of terror and to restore peace and security on the continent. This task will require a deeper and focused understanding of the drive of those who commit such acts of terror.

Key Points

❖ Explanations related to the conventional factors such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, or bad governance used to understand youth alienation and militancy are insufficient, sometimes contradictory, in explaining the case of militant Islam. Those factors may explain the sources of grievances which the youth throughout the Muslim world continue to face until today. However, they fail to explain why such youth do not opt for a non-violent-Tahrir Square mode of protest, or even go for a violent mode of protest founded on leftist or liberal principles and instead choose a violent mode grounded in extreme interpretations of Islam.

❖ The youth are driven towards militancy and violence under the conviction that they are fulfilling their religious duty to restore to Islam its lost glory. They believe that restoring such glory has to go through a reciprocal violent struggle against the forces that violently stand in their way of realizing their Islamic utopia on earth, namely, the secular western powers of the world and their allies ruling regimes in the Arab and Muslim world.

❖ A Doctrine Revision approach would strike straight into the heart of radicalization in the Muslim context. It has the potential to transform the hearts and minds of proponents of violence in the name of Islam, and to prevent more Muslim youth from joining violent doctrines and groups.

❖ Addressing the violent doctrine within Islamic circles may reduce the tendency towards opting for the use of violence in the name of Islam, but would not be useful without addressing the wider socio-political and developmental grievance factors (poverty, unemployment, inequality, illiteracy, bad governance, etc.).

❖ It is, therefore, imperative to develop multi-pronged policies to address both the doctrinal and grievance factors.

The fourth Tana Forum focused on the topic of Secularism and Politicized Faith. The Forum was preceded two weeks earlier, on the second of April, by the horrific massacre of university students in Kenya by violent Muslim radicals and ended just when innocent Ethiopian workers in Libya were slaughtered by ISIL terrorists on 20 April. It then has been followed in the last few weeks by more violent terrorist attacks. The fatal attack on 26 June 2015 at a Tunisian beach resort led to the death of almost forty tourists and was claimed by ISIL. On the same day, a suicide bomber blew up himself in a Shia Mosque in Kuwait killing and injuring dozens of worshipers. The attack was also claimed by ISIL. In Egypt, the public prosecutor was assassinated in a car bomb on 29 June in what seemed to be retaliation by militant Jihadist groups against the government and the judiciary. Bombs, with the signature of Muslim radicals, also exploded in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, and in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, in the last few weeks leaving scores of innocent civilians dead and maimed.

The continuation of violence in the name of Islam in Africa and beyond confirms the urgency to develop policies and actions to counter the waves of terror and to restore peace and security on the continent. This task will require a deeper and focused understanding of the drive of those who commit such acts of terror. The profiles of the two attackers in Tunisia and Kuwait pose serious challenges to our conventional wisdom about youth who opt for violence and militancy in the name of Islam. The Tunisian terror attack was carried out by a single Tunisian young man from the city of Qairwan. According to reports, the attacker was a 24 years old college graduate from the University of Qairwan. He was not on the terrorism radar screen of the police as he had no previous suspicious pattern of behaviour to warrant. The other attacker on the Shi'a mosque in

Kuwait was a 23 years old Saudi national, and he too was unknown to the police.

Grievance Factors vs. the Perpetual Drive to Restore Islam's Glorious Past

Conventional factors such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, or bad governance used to understand youth alienation and militancy seem to both explain everything, and explain nothing in the case of militant Islam. Those factors may explain the sources of grievances which the youth throughout the Muslim world continue to face until today. However, they fail to explain why such youth do not opt for a non-violent-Tahrir Square mode of protest, or even go for a violent mode of protest founded on leftist or liberal principles and instead choose a violent mode grounded in extreme interpretations of Islam.

Furthermore, the media tend to profile such attackers as a bunch of misguided, illiterate and desperate youth obsessed with a promise of an everlasting orgy with seventy-two concubines in paradise if they were to die for the cause of Islam. The distortion associated with such profiling, and its stark contrast to the real profile of the attackers and suicide bombers, does not help to reduce either the grievances listed above or the violence inflicted on innocent people in the name of Islam.

What the conventional factors and the media profiling fail to do is to comprehend that the appeal of militant Islam to the youth does not follow their premises or their narratives. The youth are driven towards militancy and violence under the conviction that they are fulfilling their religious duty to restore to Islam its "lost glory". They believe that restoring such glory has to go through a reciprocal violent struggle against the forces that violently stand in their way of realizing their Islamic utopia on earth,

namely, the secular western powers of the world and their ally ruling regimes in the Arab and Muslim world. It is not difficult to convince a young Muslim anywhere in the world of the injustices inflicted on Muslims by their own regimes or by western powers. It is equally not difficult to remind a young Muslim of the glorious civilization and empire of Islam which once flourished because Muslims adhered truly to their religion (regardless of the accuracy or inaccuracy of such narratives), but is now lost because they no longer adhere properly to their religion. Finally, it is not difficult then to see streams of Muslim youth witnessing the grievance factors haunting their people opt for use of violence to correct these wrongs and to restore the glorious past of Islam. Opting to militant Islam becomes the logical and religiously-infused duty to correct injustices, and to restore the lost utopia, and in dying for such cause gain the glorious status of martyrdom.

The internal logic and doctrine which drive young Muslims to choose the militant path are often related to the grievance factors, but they do not necessarily correlate sufficiently on the personal level. Many of those who opt to join the forces of militant Islam do not suffer on a personal level from illiteracy, poverty, unemployment or bad governance. In some cases, their awareness of the suffering of people due to the existence of these grievances and their belief that they violate the ideals of the Islamic utopia that once existed are sufficient factors to push them to join the militancy, as a duty required of all Muslims.

This leads us to question the viability or effectiveness of the dominant security discourse which has often been used to respond to the violence inflicted by Muslim militant groups. More often than not, governments in the Muslim world and in Western countries as well, do not uphold the rule of law, international treaties, or basic human rights conventions when fighting those militants. Instead, extralegal security measures including assassination, imprisonment, torture and surveillance of suspected individuals and groups have all been used regularly and systematically to fight those militant groups and individuals.

The use of extralegal measures has further served the militants' self-fulfilling prophecy about the injustice, brutality and viciousness of their enemies. Illegal imprisonments, torture, drone-killing, killing of innocent civilians under the pretext of collateral damage, and the abuse of family members all have been used by militants as evidence to support their *raison d'être* and as a compelling propaganda for recruitment. No wonder then that from time to time, as we have seen in Tunisia a few weeks ago, a "normal" educated young man, with no history or record of leading a life of militancy, commits such an act of terror leading to the death of scores of innocent tourists, and to his own death. The emergence of young men like that Tunisian is a proof of the ongoing failure of extralegal security measures, and the reality that we, as citizens and governments, have been only focused on the violent symptoms of militancy in the name of Islam, but not on the internal logic and doctrine which continue to produce more militants in the face of all the grievances that prevail in the Muslim world.

A more appropriate question in this regard is: How then do we address that internal logic and doctrine among young Muslims? Can we recognize their legitimate grievances about bad governance, unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, Western Powers' double standards, and at the same time divert their Islamically-infused mode of protest from being violent to becoming non-violent?

The answer, which often comes as a surprise to many, is that, in fact, such a transformation has taken place among some former leading members of Muslim militant groups in the last two decades, especially in Egypt, which is seen as the cradle of modern Islamic militancy.

Doctrine Revisions as a Core Approach to De-Radicalization

During my days as a public prosecutor in Egypt's National Security Office from 1981-1986, I participated in the investigation, interrogation and prosecution of members of the Islamic Jihad Group who assassinated President Anwar Sadat in October 1981 and attempted to overthrow the government in order to establish an Islamic state. Leaders and members of Islamic Jihad involved in that case represented an emerging wave of politicized Islamic intent of using all means, including violence, in order to re-establish the Islamic state. Their doctrine was founded on the beliefs explained earlier regarding their duty as Muslims to fight the forces which are hindering their fulfilment of a true Islamic society and state. Their use of violence culminated, in October 1981, by assassinating President Sadat, but their plot to overthrow the government was foiled and most of them were arrested.

Several of the leaders of Islamic Jihad at that time were found guilty of committing violent crimes, including murder, conspiracy to overthrow the government, and a myriad of related violent crimes. Several ended up spending life-time or long-term prison sentences. Their years in prison seemed to have given some of them a space to reflect on their religious ideologies and doctrine which espoused the duty to use violence in order to achieve their goals. That reflection process led to the emergence of what has been known as Doctrine Revisions (Muraja'at Fiqhyia). The essence of Doctrine Revisions was the acknowledgement that resorting to violence in order to achieve the goal of establishing the Islamic society and state was wrong and lacked the proper foundation in religious doctrine. Instead, the use of non-violent measures to achieve such goals was the only appropriate means. Among the leading ideologues of the Doctrine Revisions was Sayyid Imam Al-Sharif.[1] Over time, the revisions have had their successes and challenges. These revisions began as conceptions by individuals but were in later decades adopted by larger movements – namely, by Al-Jamaa Al-Islamiya in 1997 and by Islamic Jihad in 2007.

Dr. Rafiq Habib,[2] commenting on the Egyptian revisions in 2008, asserted that revisions by Islamic Jihad and Al-Jamaa Al-Islamiya aimed at establishing visions based on peaceful change that would bring the Islamic and national powers together as a means of ending or terminating violence.[3] Further, Dr. Sayyid Imam, theorist of the Islamic Jihad in Egypt, says that the revisions of the two jihadist Egyptian groups had nothing to do with the security pressures or torture perpetrated against the members of the groups while in prisons. He suggests that the revisions were the product of an interpretation that saw the use of armed violence in the process of national change as ineffective and that saw violence as causing harm to the Islamic groups and to the Egyptian society as a whole. The two scholars bring to the fore the following notions:

- ➢ Previous arguments that understood the Egyptian revisions as the product of torture are invalid, as torture has been a long-term practice within Egyptian prisons for decades.
- ➢ The revisions turned into a collective, communal operation, i.e. they became group-based, not individual ideas.
- ➢ The foundations of these revisions are a result of self-criticism by groups involved in Sadat's assassination, who eventually came to terms with the reality that their acts had not changed the existing state of affairs in Egypt.

- ➤ The Egyptian security officials have, over time, changed their attitude towards revisions, especially after the incident of the Luxor terrorist attack on foreign terrorists in 1996.
- ➤ The revisions were a product of experience itself, as the employment of violence in the process of national change harmed all parties involved including the jihad-oriented groups, the Egyptian society, and the authorities.

Since February 2007, after publication of their revision, Al-Sharif and other Jihad commanders, with the support of the Egyptian authorities, have been touring Egyptian prisons to hold meetings with their followers.[4] The visits initially featured small meetings with the commanders of Al-Jihad factions in an effort to organize a common stance. This was followed by lectures and question-and-answer sessions between the Al-Jihad leadership and the lower ranks.[5] According to political scientist Omar Ashour, the de-radicalization process appeared successful: the group has seen no armed operations since 1999, no significant splits within the movement, and around twenty-five volumes authored by the Islamic Group leaders supporting their new ideology with both theological and rational arguments.[6] According to Elshobki:

Exactly how many Egyptian jihadi prisoners have repented, and to which movements they belonged, remains unknown. Estimates range from 20,000 to 30,000, the majority of whom (some 12,000) are members of Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya, the militant organization that perpetrated much of the Islamist violence of the 1980s and 1990s. The remainders are members of smaller groups, mostly Al-Jihad, or are independent jihadists espousing Salafi ideologies.[7]

According to Ashour, the phenomenon of de-radicalization was not confined only to Egyptian militants. It has also been adopted by Algerian, Saudi, Yemeni, Jordanian, Tajik, Malaysian, and Indonesian armed Islamist movements, factions and individuals.[8] It should be noted here that the de-radicalization process is primarily concerned with changing the attitudes that these movements had toward violence – specifically violence against civilians (terrorism). The process also touched on other issues like stances on democracy and women, but there have been no major changes regarding these issues.[9] Al-Anany says there is a need to tackle the belief that defectors or those who have undergone revisions have either strayed from the 'right path' or have been coerced.[10] Clearly, efforts need to be made to understand the role of "soft power"[11] in this process because it is an essential component in combating the extremist sub-culture that defines others as less than human beings, the spilling of whose blood is halal (permissible).

Having participated in prosecuting members of Islamic Jihad in the early 1980's, and having learned about their conviction at that time that the society and government were Un-Islamic, and that it was their duty to effect change using force and violence, I regard the Doctrine Revisions to be the strongest and most efficient model for de-radicalizing those intent on using violence in the name of Islam. To see some of those who were radical violent Jihadists in the 1980's transform to become advocates of peacemaking and peaceful transformation in the 2000's is an example worthy of exploring further. One of those leaders of Islamic Jihad in the 1980's, Dr. Nageh Ibrahim, is now a celebrity in Egyptian media advocating peaceful co-existence and non-violence as the only means of addressing political and social conflicts.[12] He participated in writing four of the major Doctrine Revisions books. All books combine a unique mix of religious interpretations emphasizing the use of peaceful approaches to conflict, deploring

violence, harming and killing of civilians, with a pragmatic realization that the use of violence to achieve their goals has proven to be counterproductive, and ultimately caused more harm to Islam in general.[13] Their books also use several examples from Islamic history to show that resorting to violence to fight injustice or bad governance led to destruction and death, while resorting to non-violent methods saved lives and effected positive changes.[14]

In their book "*Mubadaret Waqf El-'Unf*" (The Initiative to Renounce Violence), the former leaders of Islamic Jihad sum up their approach:

Our initiative is not a form of substituting religion for a share of life on earth, neither is it a substitution of raising the religion of Allah for a cheap life we already left behind. Instead, it is (our initiative) about a position regarding violence which our Shari'a prohibits because of its great damages. [Renouncing violence] is a religious duty we have undertaken bravely; such duty (to renounce violence) does not contradict with our other duty to raise the religion of Allah and to establish His Shari'a. Stopping the violence is a duty, and raising the religion of Allah is a duty, and we must perform both duties.[15]

Conclusions and Recommendations: A Multi-Pronged Approach to Radicalization

A Doctrine Revision approach strikes straight into the heart of radicalization in the Muslim context. It has the potential to transform the hearts and minds of proponents of violence in the name of Islam, and to prevent more Muslim youth from joining violent doctrines and groups. The success of Doctrine Revisions in Egypt and elsewhere is worthy of further studies in order to assess its feasibility in African countries inflicted by such violence. The lessons learned from the Egyptian experience and the presence of some of the former Islamic Jihadists who became peace advocates provide great opportunities for assessing how such models may work in other African contexts.

Bringing this discussion back to Secularism and Politicized Faith - the theme of the fourth Tana Forum, a Doctrine Revision approach fits well within an enlightened secular model. While we may agree or disagree with the Islamist socio-political agenda, this remains the core of secularism: allowing groups and individuals to chart their own destiny as long as they do not interfere with others' rights to do the same and to abide by democratic rules of governance. By renouncing violence and adhering to the principles of non-violent co-existence, the Doctrine Revisions may further strengthen African models of secularism while preserving the spiritual and religious modes of lives.

The chart below specifies policy approaches to be adopted by various sectors in Africa in order to counter radicalization in the Muslim context:

Approaches	Who does it?
Continental and Regional Approaches	
Conduct an assessment of the continental and regional presence and links of Islamically violent radical groups in Africa.	The African Union, RECs and Think tanks
Identify the doctrinal foundations used by these groups to promote their message and to recruit members.	
Identify figures and personalities, including former Jihadist-turned peace advocates- with credibility to convey a counter-radicalization message.	
Develop a network of Doctrine Revision proponents on the continent.	
Engage with international organizations such as UNDP that are conducting work on de-radicalization in order to develop a cross-continental approach, connected to similar efforts worldwide.	
Religious Approaches	
Support the development and dissemination of literature on updated and relevant Doctrine Revisions.	Religious institutions, NGOs and governments
Expand religious interpretations beyond legalistic textual ones. Explore and promote the "neglected" verses focusing on tolerance and peaceful co-existence even at times of conflict.	
Promote modern and Islamic-based conflict resolution processes that emphasize non-violence and peaceful means of resolving disputes.	
Develop more creative approaches to education and information dissemination in the religious context beyond the traditional role of the male Imam.	
Make principles and values of the "glorious past" relevant to modern time.	
Cultural Approaches	
Promote a sense of respect for diversity while encouraging the preservation of a progressive Islamic identity.	Religious and Educational institutions, Media, and NGOs and governments
Highlight the positive aspects of modern civilization that are compatible with Islamic principles.	

Assert principles of equality between genders and across ethnic/racial, religious and national groups, on Islamic basis.	
Develop mechanisms to help people identify rigid oppressive traditional norms and practices that are mistaken for being Islamic.	
Develop educational curricula and media programs based on the principles and concepts included in the Doctrine Revisions.	
Political Approaches	
Insist on correcting injustices inflicted upon Muslim peoples and nations using non-violent means. Do not compromise on injustice.	Governments and NGOs
Develop approaches to expose western double standards in a manner that convinces peoples and governments in the west. Appeal to their sense of justice and fairness.	
Develop a culture of non-violent resentment of national governments' oppressive practices. Insist on pluralism and participation as foundational Islamic principles.	NGOs and Media
Emphasize Islamic principles of peaceful co-existence with all other religious, social and political groups' at all educational levels.	Religious institutions, NGOs and governments
Reject simplistic stereotyping images of Muslims and insist on addressing causes and rationales of Muslim violence.	NGOs and Media
Legal and Military Approaches	
Apply the rule of law against those suspected of committing terrorist acts.	Governments
Refrain from extra-legal practices such as torture.	
Use military force against clearly defined militant targets.	
Take responsibility for and show great sensitivity to civilian casualties as a result of military actions.	
Ensure clear and honest transparency of legal actions and military operations.	Governments and media

In conclusion, I would like to share that when I learned about the astonishing transformation of some of the leaders of Islamic Jihad whom I once participated in prosecuting and ensuring that they received their punishment for the crimes they committed in the 1980's, I sought to speak to some of them. I succeeded in establishing contact with Dr. Nageh Ibrahim in 2014. In a friendly phone conversation between the former prosecutor and former convict, we exchanged views on the peaceful and non-violent approaches to conflict in Islam.

Dr. Nageh stressed the significance and importance of Doctrine Revisions, but asserted that "they would be futile without addressing issues of social justice." His emphasis on the need to address simultaneously the issue of religious doctrine, and issues of social justice confirms the point made earlier: Addressing the violent doctrine within Islamic circles may reduce the tendency towards opting for the use of violence in the name of Islam, but would not be useful without addressing the wider socio-political and developmental grievance factors (poverty, unemployment, inequality, illiteracy, bad governance, etc.). It is, therefore, imperative to develop multi-pronged policies to address both the doctrinal and grievance factors.

End Notes

[1] Sayyid Imam Al-Sharif was a chief ideologue of the Arab Jihadists and Emir of Egypt's Jihad organization. In 1988, Al-Sharif authored what is regarded as nothing short of a Jihadist manifesto for all violent religious movements titled, "Al-Umda fi Idad Al-Idda" (Preparation for Jihad). He published revisions of his previous writings in 2007.

[2] Dr. Rafiq Habib is one of the most prominent specialists on Islamic movements. Abdul Rahman Hashim, "Revisions Add to Islamic Moderation," accessed 13 June 2011, http://www.islamonline.net

[3] Hashim, "Revisions Add to Islamic Moderation."

[4] Omar Ashour, "De-Radicalization of Jihad? The Impact of Egyptian Islamist Revisionists on Al-Qaeda," Perspectives on Terrorism, 2 no. 5 (2008), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/36/html.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Amr Elshobki, "The future and limitations of Jihad's revisions," Al-Ahram 97 no. 8 (2008), accessed 26 June 2011, http://acpss.ahram.org.eg/eng/ahram/2004/7/5/EGYP117.HTM

[8] Omar Ashour, "De-Radicalization of Jihad?"

[9] Ibid.

[10] Khalil Al-Anany, "In Focus: Jihad Revisions: It is too Late," Daily Star Egypt, 27 November 2007, accessed 7 June 2011, http://www.dailystaregypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=10511

[11] Mark Woodward, Ali Amin, and Inayah Rohmaniyah, "Police Power, Soft Power and Extremist Sub-culture in Indonesia," COMOPS Journal, accessed 7 June 2011, http://comops.org/journal/2010/03/28/police-power-soft-power-and-extremist-sub-culture-in-Indonesia

[12] For a sample of his newspaper writings advocating non-violence and peaceful co-existence, please visit El-Watan Newspaper: http://www.elwatannews.com/editor/19

[13] Hamdy Abd-el-Azim et al. "Taslit Al-Adwa Ala Ma Waqa' fi Al Jihad men Akhta". Maktabet Al Turath Al Eslami. January 2002. Cairo, Egypt. P. 49.

[14] Ibid. Pp. 103-120.

[15] Osama Ibrahim Hafez et al. (2002). "Mubadaret Waqf El-'Unf." Maktabet Al Turath Al Eslami. Cairo, Egypt. Pp. 7-8.

About the Author

Amr Abdalla, Ph.D. is a Senior Advisor on Policy Analysis and Research at the Africa Peace and Security Programme, African Union / Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University. As a public prosecutor in Egypt in the early 1980's, he participated in the interrogations and prosecution of members of the Islamic Jihad Group who assassinated President Anwar Sadat in 1981.

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