

**COUNTER
EXTREMISM
PROJECT**

GLOBAL STRATEGIES TO COMBAT EXTREMISM

Gradualists to Jihadists

Islamist Narratives in the West

GRADUALISTS TO JIHADISTS ISLAMIST NARRATIVES IN THE WEST



About the author

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Executive Summary

This paper considers the four main narratives consistently deployed by both “non-violent” and violent Islamist (Jihadist) movements. Those narratives can broadly be broken down and described as such (with considerable overlap):

- 1) Enmity for the West
- 2) An Islamic State
- 3) War on Islam
- 4) Communities Under Siege

Accepting the religious underpinnings of Islamist and Jihadist ideology, these narratives are inherently political, as the paper will explain in detail. The paper argues that Islamism should be treated in a policy sense as a political ideology like any other, and for greater attention to be paid to the political narratives of Islamist groups in Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism, such as in the Prevent and Counter-Extremism programming in the United Kingdom.

Whether it is advocating or fighting for a new state, or propagating the idea of a global community under attack at home and overseas, these are political objectives and political solutions with a religious framework.

The narratives presented in this paper were selected because they are most common to both non-violent, legally operating Islamist groups and violent Jihadist groups. This allows the narratives that Jihadists use to enter the mainstream and be introduced to much wider audiences than would otherwise be possible, presenting a radicalisation risk.

It should be noted, however, that this paper does not argue for legal sanctions or actions to be taken against the groups using these narratives.

It is hoped that greater emphasis on the political dimensions of Islamism presented in this paper could serve to combat the narratives behind radicalisation, reduce conflation of Islamism as an ideology and Islam as a faith, and ensure programming is more targeted.

ISLAMIST NARRATIVES

“...there has, perhaps, been no time in modern history when so large a number of human beings, both in the East and West, have had their notions, and indeed their lives, so deeply altered, and in some cases violently upset, by fanatically held social and political doctrines. Dangerous, because when ideas are neglected by those who ought to attend to them - that is to say, those who have been trained to think critically about ideas - they sometimes acquire an unchecked momentum and an irresistible power over multitudes of men that may grow too violent to be affected by rational criticism. Over a hundred years ago, the German poet Heine warned the French not to underestimate the power of ideas: philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor's study could destroy a civilization.”

– Two Concepts of Liberty, Isaiah Berlin¹

Introduction

In the 21st Century, the dual threat of state communism and state fascism have largely faded from view, but another set of “fanatically held social and political doctrines” to those described by Isaiah Berlin have been unleashed on the world.

Individuals and groups adhering to militant Islamism, a political ideology underpinned by a strict and literalist interpretation of religion, have claimed tens of thousands of lives around the world. They have provoked the might of the most powerful military alliance in history and in recent years the appeal of their utopian ideal has convinced thousands to abandon their lives and travel to join the brutal Islamic State experiment in Iraq and Syria. In the process they have destroyed lives and entire communities and permanently scarred parts of the Middle East.

The field of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and domestic terrorism prevention efforts (such as the UK's Prevent Strategy) have sought not only to divert individuals from being radicalised into groups like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, but to challenge the ideology of violent extremist groups².

In the case of Salafi-Jihadist groups, the global efforts to challenge Salafi-Jihadism through counter-narrative campaigns and community projects have often been unfocussed or imprecise in expressing how the project will challenge the core tenets of the ideology. In fact, the ideology remains poorly understood across the mainstream in many Western countries, and there have also been concerted efforts to downplay the role of ideology in motivating Jihadist violence³. CVE and counter-terrorism policies have suffered as a result.

Not only this, but public discourse, which has been trapped in a polarising debate which posits that Jihadist ideology is either everything or “nothing to do with religion”, has impacted on policy as well. Many projects have attempted to tackle peripheral issues, such as building critical thinking skills and online safety, or reducing the impact of perceived structural drivers (such as poverty or lack of education) of violent extremism. In other instances, they have focussed on women's rights or tolerance and homophobia, and while Islamist and Jihadist groups are recognised as patriarchal and homophobic, these are not core tenets of the ideology.

1: Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts Of Liberty,” Four Essays On Liberty, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 118-172 https://cactus.dixie.edu/green/B_Readings/I_Berlin%20Two%20Concpets%20of%20Liberty.pdf

2: One stated objective of the UK's Prevent Strategy is to “respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism.” Prevent Strategy, HM Government, June 2011 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf

3: Jeffrey M. Bale, “Denying the Link between Islamist Ideology and Jihadist Terrorism: “Political Correctness” and the Undermining of Counterterrorism”, Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol 7 No 5 (2013) <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/290/html>

In recent years though, there have been increased efforts to tackle the theological underpinning of Jihadist violence. However, projects which sit at either end of this polarised debate have largely failed to recognise Jihadism as the violent avant-garde of a global political movement called Islamism. As one Belgian counter-terrorism official and academic put it, Al-Qaeda is an “epiphenomenon”, and is only the most visible manifestation of the much larger Islamist movement⁴.

This guidance document makes the case that in the absence of widespread expertise to tackle the theological underpinnings of Jihadist violence, a higher priority should be placed on undermining, delegitimising and challenging the political narratives and political beliefs and objectives which legitimise and sanction the violence.

The political ideology underpinning Jihadist violence borrows and builds upon the ideological doctrines of Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and Osama Bin Laden’s worldview was heavily influenced by Muslim Brotherhood ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb, as explained in detail in the 9/11 Commission Report⁵.

Although there are bitter disagreements relating to tactics across the spectrum of political Islam (Islamism), from the gradualists of the Muslim Brotherhood to the revolutionaries of Hizb ut-Tahrir and the offensive Jihadists of Al-Qaeda, there is considerable overlap in the political narratives propagated by these groups, and individuals and groups have moved along the spectrum from the less militant to more militant expressions of this ideology⁶.

This guidance does not seek to make a judgement on rolling debates surrounding the legitimacy of engaging “non-violent” Islamist groups in certain contexts, nor to make a moral judgement on the worth of their political objectives. This guidance recognises that groups like Islamic State would readily consider the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood as apostates for their willingness to work within democratic frameworks, and conversely that many Islamists are horrified by the ultra-violence of such groups (although conflicted relationships to violence will be explored later in this paper).

With this in mind, and in order to both uphold democratic values and prevent individual radicalisation, this guidance makes the case for countering the political narratives deployed to varying degrees by both non-violent Islamists and violent Jihadists. Furthermore, the hope is that by considering Islamism as a political ideology rather than simply as an extension of the Islamic faith, we can contribute to overcoming the frequently misplaced cultural and religious sensitivities surrounding Islamism.

There is no shortage of individuals who have embraced Jihadist ideology after being introduced to Islamist narratives in wider mainstream society, from institutions platforming Jihadist clerics like Anwar Al-Awlaki and Abu Qatada to pushing the narrative of Western hostility to Islam and Muslims. As described by his chronicler Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Anwar Al-Awlaki himself only had to make “painless” and “minute” adjustments to his belief system to move along the spectrum to militant Jihadism⁷.

It is therefore in the interest of democratic states and civil society to push back and counter the divisive narratives identified in this paper. This guidance seeks to help political leaders, civil society and practitioners to understand and identify the key themes which are shared across the Islamist spectrum, as well as suggestions and recommendations for countering those very narratives.

4: Quote attributed to Alain Grignard, deputy head of Belgian Police anti-terror unit and professor of Islamic Studies at Brussels Free University: Sylvain Besson, *La Conquête de L’occident* (Paris: Seuil, 2005) p.40

5: “The 9/11 Commission Report”, United States Government, July 22 2004 <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>

6: Men like Abdullah Azzam, the ‘father of modern Jihad,’ and current Al-Qaeda leader Aymen Al-Zawahiri are both formerly Muslim Brotherhood members having adopted a much more offensively minded strategy. Similarly, Hamas was originally established as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and uses militant tactics like attacks on civilians and suicide bombings justified by their interpretation of Jihad.

7: Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar Al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad”, ICSR, 2011 p. 259 <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/ICSR-Report-As-American-As-Apple-Pie-How-Anwar-al-Awlaki-Became-the-Face-of-Western-Jihad.pdf>

Islamism Explainer: "Islam is the Solution"⁸

Islamism is a political ideology which is underpinned by a strict and literalist interpretation of Islam and foundational texts. Islamism, as a term, is used to make a distinction between the faith of Islam and the political ideology to which Islamist groups adhere.

Scholar of political Islam, Peter Mandaville has defined political Islam or Islamism as referring to:

"Forms of political theory and practice that have as their goal the establishment of an Islamic political order in the sense of a state whose governmental principles, institutions and legal system derive directly from the shari'ah."⁹

Islamists believe that Islam is not simply a matter of private faith, but an all-encompassing set of values, norms and laws instructing both private and public life.



Hassan Al-Banna (pictured left), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood (arguably the most important Islamist movement in the world today) summarised this position as such:

"Those who think that these teachings [Islam] are concerned only with the spiritual or ritualistic aspects are mistaken in this belief, because Islam is a faith and a ritual, a nation and a nationality, a religion and a state, spirit and deed, holy text and sword."¹⁰

Islamism itself is an umbrella term for a wide range of groups and movements. 'Non-violent'¹¹ Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat-e-Islami and Hizb ut-Tahrir are active in the UK and a number of Western countries. In the UK, these groups are legal and not proscribed by terrorism legislation.

However, Islamism is also used to describe the ideology of Salafi-Jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State as well as proscribed organisations like Al-Muhajiroun (ALM). At times, as in the case of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, Islamist groups are in open conflict with each other despite sharing overlapping agendas. Similarly, Islamic State would consider Islamist groups which are not Salafi-Jihadi in ideology as apostates.

In this sense, Islamism might be considered as a spectrum of belief, from those who engage in and participate in democratic processes, to those on the other end of the spectrum pursuing extreme violence as a strategy to achieve their aims, such as Islamic State.

However, Jeffrey M. Bale has warned that Islamist groups who engage in democratic processes should not lull policymakers into a false sense of security. Bale argues that these groups cannot be considered 'moderate' or truly 'democratic', as this erroneously conflates the means with the ends¹².

In other words, Islamists' ultimate objective of a religious state governed according to a strict interpretation of Sharia, would be at odds with democratic values and current conceptions of human rights, even if the strategy to achieve it works largely within a democratic framework.

Additionally, use of the term 'non-violent' to describe Islamist groups should not be confused with pacifism – these groups are not pacifistic and the decision to forego violence is often a strategic decision, rather than a matter of principle.

8: Popular Muslim Brotherhood slogan

9: Peter Mandaville, *Islam and Politics*, 2014

10: Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of Muslim Brothers*, July 29 1993. pp 232-233

11: These groups are often described as "non-violent," or even "moderate" Islamist groups. It is important to note that this does not mean these groups are 'pacifist', simply that they have eschewed the use of violence as a tactical decision. For many groups, the principle of 'armed Jihad' remains an obligation under the appropriate circumstances.

12: Jeffrey M. Bale, "Denying the Link between Islamist Ideology and Jihadist Terrorism: "Political Correctness" and the Undermining of Counterterrorism", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol 7 No 5 (2013) <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/290/html>

Intellectual Islam

As explained in the introduction, Islamism, as implied by its inception in the West by actual political parties – the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami – is a political ideology, with Jihadists as the radically violent offshoots of that movement. Particularly since the emergence of ‘homegrown terrorism’ in the West, Islamism has been downplayed as an intellectual construct, despite the articulate, intelligent, charismatic and theologically literate ideologues that have contributed to its evolution.

Modern Islamism, first birthed by the charisma and relentless activism of middle-class professionals like Hassan Al-Banna and Abul A’la Maududi, has been imagined and reshaped by leading thinkers like Sayyid Qutb, whose Milestones “remains the most influential manifesto in Islamist politics”, and the ‘father of modern Jihad’, Abdullah Azzam¹³.

Practitioners, civil society leaders and political leaders should first and foremost recognise and respect Islamism as a coherent political ideology, which some adherents are willing to use extreme violence to advance. Failing to recognise this political challenge, of which Jihadism is one violent manifestation, and the role of Islamist ideology and narratives in Jihadist violence has hampered Western counter-terrorism efforts.

Western Islamists: ‘Participationists’ & ‘Rejectionists’

Islamist groups in the West are sometimes referred to as either ‘participationist’ or ‘rejectionist’¹⁴. Rejectionist groups range from organisations like Hizb ut-Tahrir, who openly oppose democracy, the systems of governance and values of the West, but do not advocate terrorism and violence, up to groups like Al-Muhajiroun and Jihadist terror groups like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State.

On the other hand, ‘participationist’ groups, including the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, are willing to work within democratic frameworks i.e. lobbying, encouraging democratic participation and even standing in elections in order to realise their ultimate objective. In this sense, participationist groups take a much more gradualist approach, as opposed to those advocating offensive Jihad (such as Al-Qaeda) or military coups (Hizb ut-Tahrir) in pursuit of their aims.

Islamist movements and groups		V I O L E N C E
Participationist	Rejectionist	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Muslim Brotherhood• Jamaat-e-Islami• Milli Gorus (Turkish Islamist group)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hizb ut-Tahrir• Al-Muhajiroun• Al-Qaeda• Islamic State	

13: Gilles Keppel, “The New Jihad and its Mentors”, Qantara, Dec 24 2019 <https://en.qantara.de/content/essay-by-Islam-expert-gilles-kepel-the-new-jihad-and-its-mentors>

14: Damon Lee Perry, “The Global Muslim Brotherhood in Britain A Social Movement?”, (Thesis, King’s College London, 2016) https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/52996038/2016_Perry_Damon_Lee_1142640_ethesis.pdf

Non-Violent Islamism in Britain: Islamic Revival

According to the independent Commission for Countering Extremism report, 'Challenging Hateful Extremism', the history of the Islamist movement in Britain can largely be traced back to two twentieth century movements, the Muslim Brotherhood, with its origins in Egypt and the Middle East, and Jamaat-e-Islami, with its origins in South Asia¹⁵. Hizb ut-Tahrir is also present and active in the United Kingdom, although some have argued its influence and membership have waned in recent years¹⁶.

Islamism expert, Damon L. Perry, refers to the more mainstream British Islamist groups as part of an 'Islamic revivalist' movement, in that although the creation of a global Islamic state is still the endgame, they believe it will be a natural consequence of the 'Islamisation' of society, so for the time being this is their objective, rather than the coercive creation of a state by coup or revolution¹⁷.

Damon L. Perry characterises the development of the 'Islamic revivalist movement' in Britain as having three distinct phases:

"The first mainstream Islamist organisations, established by Jamaati and Brotherhood cadres in the 1960s and 1970s, include the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS); the UK Islamic Mission (UKIM); the Muslim Educational Trust (MET); Muslim Welfare House; the Islamic Foundation; and Dawatul Islam UK & Eire. In the 1980s and 1990s came the Islamic Sharia Council; Muslim Aid; the Islamic Forum of Europe (IFE); the Association of Muslim Schools UK (AMS-UK); the Palestinian Relief and Development Fund (Interpal); and the Palestine Return Centre.

"In 1997, three important organisations were founded, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB); the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB); and the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC). In the 2000s, additional groups were established, reflecting a further diversification of Islamist interests, including Cage (initially called Cageprisoners); the Islam Channel; the Cordoba Foundation; Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND, initially called iEngage); and the Middle East Monitor."¹⁸

Thus, many of the latest generation of 'revivalist' groups in Britain and other Western countries do not have explicit or obvious links to the 20th Century Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, though they share a deep ideological affinity. Of course, Muslim Brotherhood, and Jamaat-e-Islami linked groups are still active in the UK, as with Hizb ut-Tahrir.

This paper will primarily examine Islamist movements and groups with their origins in political parties, and the Jihadist, or Salafi-Jihadist groups like Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. For the sake of simplicity, other movements such as Tablighi Jamaat or the broader Salafist movement will not be discussed in detail.

15: "Challenging Hateful Extremism," Commission for Countering Extremism, October 2019. p.42 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874101/200320_Challenging_Hateful_Extremism.pdf

16: Shiv Malik, "Watchdog recommends Tory U-turn on banning Hizb ut-Tahrir," The Guardian, July 18 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/jul/18/watchdog-tory-uturn-hizb-ut-tahrir-ban>

17: Damon L. Perry, "Mainstream Islamism in Britain: Educating for the "Islamic Revival"," HM Government, September 2019. p.2 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/836571/Mainstream-Islamism-in-britain-education-for-the-Islamic-revival.pdf

18: Damon L. Perry, "Mainstreaming Islamism in Britain," p.2

Narratives, Alternative Narratives and Counter-Narratives

“Although facts are important, the truth of a situation presented to any given individual has more to do with how that individual organises available data than any objective and idealized ‘truth’.”¹⁹

– *Narrative Landmines*, Scott W. Ruston et al

Narratives, counter-narratives and positive or alternative narratives have taken on great significance in the fight against Islamist extremism, from the battle for ‘hearts and minds’ in Iraq and Afghanistan to domestic prevention efforts that would fall under P/CVE (Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism).²⁰

In this paper, narratives are understood in the following terms:

“A **narrative** is a system of stories that hang together and provide a coherent view of the world. People use narratives to understand how their world works. Narratives contain patterns that fit the data of everyday life (events, people, actions, sequences of actions, messages, and so on), explaining how events unfold over time and how one thing causes another.”²¹

– *Scott Ruston, Arizona State University Center for Strategic Communication*

Through the lens of countering extremism and terrorism, these narratives hang together and are leveraged into support for extremist groups. When early figures in the adoption of Islamist thought looked out at the Muslim world of the early to 20th Century, they saw a state of decay, subjugation and humiliation. They explained this through a narrative which held the West responsible for this state of decay, so asserted a worldview which called for the expulsion of Western influence and a reassertion of Islamic values. This narrative was most sharply expressed in Bin Laden’s narrative of a Crusader-Zionist alliance persecuting Muslims and occupying Muslim lands²².

This section of the paper will identify four Islamist overarching narratives to be undermined, delegitimized and for alternatives to be provided through local community projects, counter-narrative campaigns and strategic communications (StratCom). The four narrative themes are identified on the basis that they are shared or amplified across the spectrum of Islamist movements, from the revivalists to the revolutionaries and the Salafi-Jihadists, although with considerable variance relating to group modus operandi and local, regional or global conditions.

The risk for states dealing with domestic radicalization is that the narratives propagated by non-violent Islamists, although considerably less inflammatory than the Salafi-Jihadists, do overlap and potentially feed into the narrative of the likes of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, increasing their appeal and legitimacy. If narratives are key for individuals to understand and interpret the world around them, countering the narratives which are consistent across Islamist movements should be a key interest for democratic states concerned by Islamist radicalisation.

The very political and cultural nature of the narratives used by Islamist groups has been painfully overlooked in policy responses and CVE initiatives to date, with leaders often describing Islamist violence as ‘senseless’ or ‘mindless’²³, CVE responses have been overly focused on critical thinking and digital literacy, concentrating on the medium and the propaganda rather than the overall narrative, how it hangs together, its potency and its resonance in helping individuals to interpret the world around them. When individuals feel uncertainty, or recognise injustice, they will seek or create a narrative to make sense of it. It is here that current efforts need refocusing.

19: David Leonard Bernardi, Pauline Hope Cheong, Chris Lundry, Scott W. Ruston, *Narrative Landmines: Rumors, Islamist Extremism and the Struggle for Strategic Influence*, New Directions in International Studies, 15 May 2012

20: For more on ‘hearts and minds’ in Iraq see: Adam Allington, ‘Iraq Democracy: Winning Hearts and Minds’, VOA News, Oct 27 2009 <https://www.voanews.com/archive/iraq-democracy-winning-hearts-and-minds>.

21: Scott W. Ruston, “Understand What Narrative Is and Does”, Arizona State University, Sep 3 2009 <http://csc.asu.edu/2009/09/03/understand-what-narrative-is-and-does/>.

22: “Text: Osama bin Laden’s 1998 interview”, The Guardian, Oct 8 2001 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/08/afghanistan.terrorism15>

23: Sheryl Saperia, “Is Terrorism Really ‘Senseless’?”, *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, Aug 4 2016 <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2016/08/04/is-terrorism-really-senseless/>

Islamist narratives present a particular challenge as they are formulated and deployed with great cultural resonance by individuals and groups operating within the traditions and cultural reference points of Muslim communities. Simply going 'tit for tat' with information is not sufficient.

For example, the notion that explaining the 'correct' interpretation of Jihad as internal struggle, not Holy War as the Jihadists believe, or simply highlighting passages in the Quran which contradict the Jihadists is not a narrative or a story and is unlikely to carry much resonance with target audiences.

When Bin Laden spoke of Crusader-Zionists he was drawing on narrative strands with resonance and familiarity across the Muslim world: the historic fight against Christian European invaders, the animating effect of the Israel-Palestine conflict and sadly pervasive antisemitism (which is of course, not unique to the Muslim world)²⁴.

When Islamists in the West speak of Muslim persecution, they can leverage issues with resonance in Muslim communities, such as the perceived injustice of counter-terrorism policies or biased media coverage, and connect it to wider patterns of injustice, persecution and oppression around the world. They can speak with authority on these subjects because they are coming from within the community themselves, and they can often claim personal experiences of persecution.

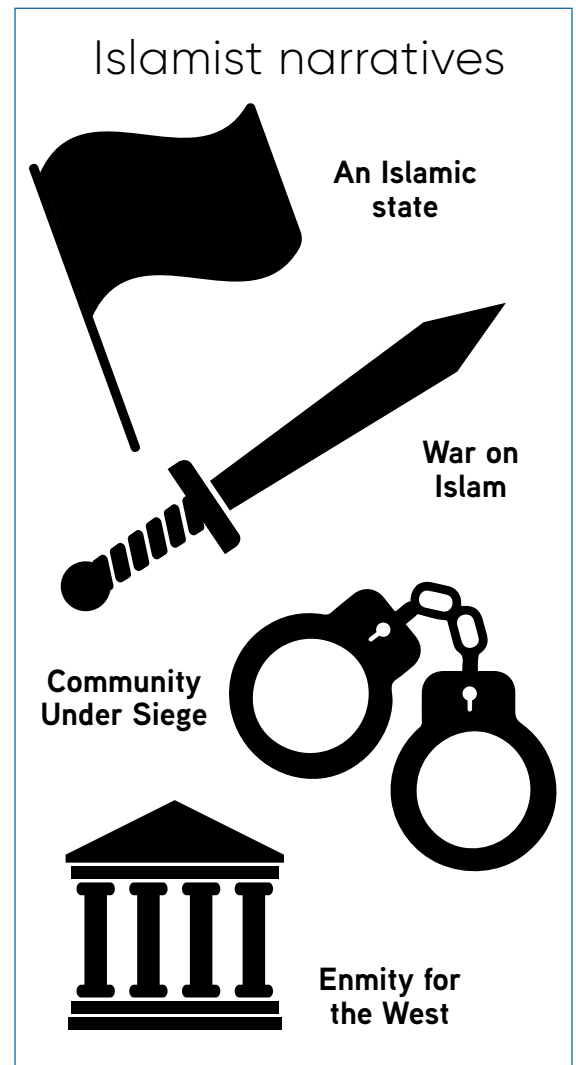
These narrative themes which are consistent across the Islamist spectrum, and which are deployed and tailored to local conditions, are explored further in the next section.

The four narrative themes identified in this paper, although inextricably underpinned by religious belief, are inherently political, and the 'solutions' offered by Islamists to these narratives are similarly political objectives.

The desire for an Islamic state or "Caliphate" is a political objective, just as any other form of governance over territory is political. Although grounded in conspiratorial and racist notions such as that of a "Crusader-Zionist" alliance, the idea that "the West" and Israel are attacking, subjugating and sponsoring the oppression of Muslims around the world is a political narrative.

All of these narrative themes overlap considerably. Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda's narrative of a Western war on Islam is not limited to a military attack, they posit that Western consumerism and democracy comprise a cultural attack on Islam and Muslims. The narrative of a multi-faceted war on Islam renders taking up arms in defence of Islam and Muslims as not merely justified, but an obligation.

In the eyes of Islamists, the West is responsible for Muslim suffering. Defending Islam is the necessary course of action, and the creation of an Islamic state or Khilafa (Caliphate) is the overall and lasting solution to the problems afflicting the Muslim world.



1: Enmity for the West



How Islamists view and relate their own movement to the West is crucial to understanding their worldview, and to understanding the narratives detailed in this paper. Many of the major thinkers from across the Islamist spectrum had their views informed by interactions with the Western world. Al-Banna and Maududi, founders of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, came of age in an Egypt under British protectorate and the crown jewel of the British Empire, India.

Muslim Brotherhood ideologue and ‘grandfather of Jihadism’, Sayyid Qutb, spent time studying in Colorado, where he grew angered by socio-political issues like racial segregation, but also at everything from haircuts to mixing of the sexes²⁶. Later, Bin Laden would view the source of the Muslim world’s ills largely as the result of meddling by a “Crusader-Zionist” alliance led by the United States and Israel.

The place of Crusaders in this narrative is deliberate, as the defence of Muslim lands from Christian invaders has great resonance to Muslims in many different parts of the world. The United States as the continuation of the Crusader armies and the colonial forces of the 18th and 19th Centuries is therefore a powerful and animating historical image to conjure.

The Brothers and the West

Historian of the Muslim Brotherhood, Dr. Martyn Frampton has described how even despite influential Muslim Brotherhood thinkers’ acceptance that the West does not constitute a monolith, the movement nonetheless continues to hold deep enmity towards even the West as an intellectual construct:

“[The Brotherhood] inhabited a world in which its ‘enemies’ pressed in on all sides. ‘The West’, as an ideal, continued to be imagined as an inveterately hostile force. Just as had been that case under Al-Banna, it was defined primarily by its materialism and moral degeneracy, though again, it was also said to carry an abiding ‘Crusader’ ethos.”²⁷

In this way, despite periods of mutual engagement, the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideological counterparts’ relationship with the West is one characterised by deep paranoia. The Brotherhood’s offshoots and mutations, to a large extent, have inherited this paranoia and defensiveness about the corrupting influences of the West and the colonial and imperialistic threat it poses.

Indeed, for modern Islamists, the notion of Western persecution of Muslims, amplified by the West’s support of Israel, seems to be a much more animating narrative than persecution by non-Western actors. For example, at the time of writing, evidence suggests the Chinese Communist Party regime is currently holding large numbers of its Uighur Muslim population in concentration camps. So far, this has been far less animating for Islamists than the response to the War on Terror or Guantanamo Bay.

These movements, born out of interactions with and suspicion of the West, hold the West as an almost mythical adversary and corrupting influence, a sentiment which endures in the many mutations of the global Islamist movement today.

25: Sayyid Qutb, *The America I Have Seen* (1951) https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/3F/3F56ACA473044436B4C1740F-65D5C3B6_Sayyid_Qutb_-_The_America_I_Have_Seen.pdf

26: Martyn Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West: A History of Enmity and Engagement*, (Harvard University Press, 2018). pp.464

27: Ibid pp.464-465

Sayyid Qutb, the West and the Bin Laden Worldview

“Qutb mixed Islamic scholarship with a very superficial acquaintance with Western history and thought. Sent by the Egyptian government to study in the United States in the late 1940s, Qutb returned with an enormous loathing of Western society and history. He dismissed Western achievements as entirely material, arguing that Western society possesses “nothing that will satisfy its own conscience and justify its existence.”²⁸ – 9/11 Commission

Sayyid Qutb, the deeply influential Muslim Brotherhood ideologue, was the key figure in the formulation of a decidedly more militant strain of Islamist ideology than that of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan Al-Banna; leading some to refer to Qutb as everything from the “Godfather”²⁹ of modern Jihadism to “the Philosopher of Islamic Terror”³⁰.



Osama Bin Laden’s worldview borrowed heavily from that of Sayyid Qutb. Both Qutb and Bin Laden saw the hand of the United States (and Israel/

Jews) behind all conflicts involving Muslims, from Palestine to the Philippines and Kashmir, and they saw Muslim leaders as ‘agents’ of the United States. Bin Laden explained his view of the inextricable link between Muslim leaders and American hegemony:

“The removal of these governments is an obligation upon us, and a necessary step to free the Ummah, to make the Shariah the supreme law and to regain Palestine. And our fight against these governments is not separate from our fight against you.”³¹

Bin Laden and Qutb made little distinction between what they saw as the moral decay in the West, the failure to implement Sharia, instead opting for ‘man made laws’, and the military actions of the United States:

“It is saddening to tell you that you are the worst civilization witnessed by the history of mankind.”³² – *Bin Laden, Letter to America*

In the worldview of Qutb and Bin Laden, Jihad was a necessary and obligatory response to the assault on Islam and Muslims being waged by the United States and its allies. In the words of the 9/11 Commission report:

“Bin Ladin shares Qutb’s stark view, permitting him and his followers to rationalize even unprovoked mass murder as righteous defense of an embattled faith.”³³

During his time in America, Qutb observed sin and moral decline everywhere around him. In his essay, ‘The America I have seen’, Qutb famously even found everything from haircuts to the mixing of sexes at a church dance in small town America of the 1950s objectionable³⁴. Echoes of his accounts of racial segregation in America at the time can also be found in later writings by Bin Laden, including his 2002 Letter to America³⁵.

28: “The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States”, United States Government, July 22 2004 p.51 <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>

29: John C. Zimmerman, “Sayyid Qutb’s Influence On The 11 September Attacks”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (2004) 16:2, 222-252

30: Paul Berman, “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror”, *New York Times*, March 23 2003 <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/magazine/the-philosopher-of-islamic-terror.html>

31: “Full text: bin Laden’s ‘letter to America’”, *The Guardian*, Nov 24 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver>

32: Ibid 33: “9/11 Commission” p.51 34: Sayyid Qutb, “The America I Have Seen” (1951) 35: Bin Laden, “Letter to America”

Qutb's time in America was not spent in the dens of sin in Las Vegas or along Bourbon Street, New Orleans, it was spent in smalltown America, in Greeley, Colorado. A famous American poet once wrote of Greeley: "You'll die of dullness in less than five hours"³⁶. David Von Drehle wrote in the Smithsonian Magazine: "None of that made any difference to Qutb, who saw only what he already believed, and wrote not facts, but his own truth, in his 1951 essay, "The America I Have Seen"³⁷."

Nonetheless, Qutb's work and worldview, exerted considerable influence on Osama Bin Laden, who was a student of Abdullah Azzam, the "father" of modern Jihad, who was himself a disciple of Sayyid Qutb. Qutb³⁸, Azzam and Bin Laden were instrumental in transforming various strands of radical Islamic thinking expressed across disparate localised movements into a globalised brand of militant Islamism. Each of these men's worldview was informed by deep anti-Western sentiment, in military, cultural, political and religious terms.

Today, the same suspicion and enmity towards the West is held by various strands of the modern Islamist movement. In a paper for the George Washington University Program on Extremism, Dina Al-Raffie explained:

"Regardless of the nature of their agenda, many Islamists generally tend to be skeptical of Western systems of governance, particularly democracies, and many perceive them as being a front for Western cultural imperialism and a threat to Islam and Islamic religious identity.

"Select Islamist organizations will, at times, also actively work to promote societal cleavages along sectarian lines in order to successfully build Islamic constituencies favorable to their political agenda. The result of the said organizations' activism can, at a minimum, instill the 'us vs. them' mentality among Muslims that similarly lies at the heart of more violent Islamist movements."³⁹

Lorenzo Vidino expands on how the West is viewed by the Brotherhood in terms of morality and decadence:

"A common theme of the Western Brotherhood's literature and speeches is the moral bankruptcy of the Western world. Like any non-Muslim society, Western society is criticized for not having accepted the only true religion, Islam. But the strongest criticisms of the West are about its abandonment of its own religion, its spiritual decline, and its lax moral customs.

"Loss of moral values, secularism, sexual promiscuity, and displays of public drunkenness are some of the diseases that the Brothers, like any religiously conservative movement, see as plagues."⁴⁰

36: David Von Drehle, "A Lesson in Hate", Smithsonian Magazine, Feb 2006 <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-lesson-in-hate-109822568/>

37: Ibid

38: "Abdullah Azzam," Counter Extremism Project <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/abdullah-azzam>

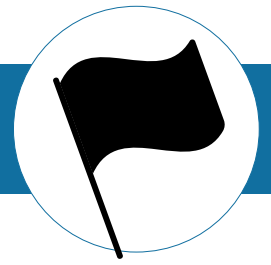
39: Dina Al-Raffie, "The Identity-Extremism Nexus: Countering Islamist Extremism in the West", GW Program on Extremism, October 2015 <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/downloads/AI%20Raffie.pdf>

40: Lorenzo Vidino, The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West. p.71

Continued: Islamist Narratives

The master narratives identified in the following section should be understood in reference to Islamist views on the West. Behind the oppression and persecution faced by Muslims, behind the need to defend Islam and Muslims is the hand of the West. The solution to this external aggression, the world in which the faithful are under attack from Western culture and armies, is the global Islamic state, a state governed according to the Sharia, and not according to corrupt Western institutions and man-made laws.

2: An Islamic State



Since the summer of 2014, when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) formally changed its name to simply, Islamic State (IS), 'Caliphate' has become something of a household term.

From the pulpit of Mosul Mosque, IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared that the group had restored the Caliphate, proclaiming himself the 'Caliph', while claiming direct lineage from the Prophet Muhammad. Although this claim gave Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi greater legitimacy among followers to declare himself the Caliph, or "successor", his claim to have restored the Caliphate was widely rejected by mainstream Muslim public opinion and among religious scholars.



This map, taken from IS propaganda, gives an indication of the group's eventual ambitions for the Caliphate's spread (through conquest)

However, it is important to note that the vision of the restoration of the Caliphate was not imagined by Islamic State themselves, Al-Qaeda too, seeks the re-establishment of the Caliphate – although their strategy for achieving this objective differs considerably. As Atlantic journalist Graeme Wood put it: "Bin Laden viewed his terrorism as a prologue to a caliphate he did not expect to see in his lifetime"⁴¹. Compared to Islamic State, who were prepared to declare their "Caliphate" at the earliest opportunity.

Furthermore, Islamist groups across the spectrum seek the establishment of a religiously governed state and the eventual re-establishment of the Caliphate.

The Caliphate

The Caliphate was a political-religious state or empire ruled by a Caliph (meaning "successor") in the centuries following the Prophet Muhammad's death.

At its height, the caliphate encompassed large swathes of the Middle East and North Africa, stretching from Southern Europe to South-West Asia.

The Caliph is a highly contested title for which there have been many competing claims over the centuries, including most recently the sultans of the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic State group.

For Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, the religious state governed according to the Sharia is something of a utopian ideal which would follow the Islamic 'revival' – a restoration of Islamic values and identity while rejecting malign foreign and secular influences. This utopian vision is held as an answer to the many ills and the state of decline they argue afflict the Muslim world.

The state of decline is largely attributed to Western influence on the military, cultural, social and religious affairs of the global Muslim community – the "Ummah". Influential Muslim Brotherhood founder, Hassan Al-Banna, saw the West as responsible for a "military-political-ethical-social invasion" of the Muslim world⁴².

Their solution to this invasion on all fronts? A re-asserting of Islamic values and the installation of a new global Islamic state or "Caliphate". Thus, the vision takes on a Utopian character, by offering solutions and peace to embattled Muslims around the world.

The utopian nature of the Caliphate ideal was encapsulated in the title of the Hizb ut-Tahrir America branch 2020 conference:

41: Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," The Atlantic, March 2015 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>

42: Lorenzo Vidino, The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West, p18

43: <https://en-gb.facebook.com/htbritain/videos/655638171902112/>

Strategy for Establishing an Islamic State

Salafi-Jihadists

The strategy by which Islamists seek to create religious states and/or restore the Caliphate greatly influences their modus operandi. For example, the Al-Qaeda leadership believed that the Caliphate was a distant objective, and thus primarily pursued a strategy of attacking the 'far enemy' - the United States and its allies. In contrast, Islamic State pursued a strategy of establishing the Caliphate in much more immediate terms, and thus found itself fighting on all fronts as part terror group, part insurgency, part functioning state and part army. A popular Islamic State slogan reflected this reality: "remaining and expanding"⁴⁴.

Other groups, or franchises and affiliates of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have sought to install Sharia in territory they control. Al-Qaeda's East African affiliate, Al-Shabaab, has implemented Sharia in territory under its control in Somalia, as have other Al-Qaeda linked groups in Mali and the Sahel.

Revivalists

In contrast, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami in the West pursue a gradualist approach, first seeking a revival of Islamic values among Western Muslims through which the eventual Islamic state will naturally follow. They often pursue this strategy by founding front groups and controlling institutions which aim to politicise Muslim identity and gradually introduce the Islamic revival which would precede the Islamic state.

The 'Islamisation' and politicisation of Western Muslim communities has led French President Emmanuel Macron to label these tactics as 'Islamist separatism', creating parallel societies dominated by Islamist influence and practices⁴⁵. Macron did not come up with this idea himself, senior Islamist ideologue Yusuf Al-Qaradawi has actively instructed followers to create barriers between Muslim communities in the West and wider society⁴⁶. One European intelligence agency's assessment was similarly pessimistic:

"The ultimate aim – although never stated openly – is to create, then implant and expand, an ultra-orthodox Muslim bloc inside Western Europe."⁴⁷ —
AIVD, Domestic Intelligence Agency of the Netherlands

As Islamist influence over these blocs increases, as will demands from the state, such as for competing legal structures, allowing the revivalists to slowly inch closer to realising the eventual religious jurisdiction over all matters of life and society they seek.

In Egypt and the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood is known to take greater direct action than in the West. In Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood was founded, the party stood in, and won, the country's first national elections following the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring.

There is a more militant side to the Brotherhood though, as Sayyid Qutb advocated for the overthrow of Muslim rulers he saw as failing to implement Sharia, using the principle of Takfir (excommunication)⁴⁸. In the words of Muslim Brotherhood expert Lorenzo Vidino, Qutb's more militant brand of Islamism makes him "the undisputed ideological forefather of modern Islamist terrorism"⁴⁹. Various strands and leaders within the broader Islamist movement have rejected Qutb's strategy, but he remains a popular and influential figure.

44: Issue #5 of Islamic State's English language 'Dabiq' magazine, published in November 2014 was titled 'Remaining and Expanding' to reflect the objectives of the newly founded Caliphate

45: Lorenzo Vidino, "Emmanuel Macron's War on Islamism Is Europe's Future", Foreign Policy, Feb 24 2020 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/24/emmanuel-macrons-war-on-islamism-is-europes-future/>

46: Lorenzo Vidino, "Aims and Methods of Europe's Muslim Brotherhood", Hudson Institute, Nov 1 2006 <https://www.hudson.org/research/9776-aims-and-methods-of-europe-s-muslim-brotherhood>

47: "The Radical Dawa in Transition: The Rise of Islamic Neoradicalism in the Netherlands", AIVD, February 2008

48: Takfir = Excommunication from Islam

49: Vidino, The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West p.25

Revolutionaries

Hizb ut-Tahrir on the other hand, aims to overthrow governments and regimes in Muslim countries largely through military coups. In each of those states, Sharia will be introduced following the overthrow of what they view as corrupt Muslim rulers.

Thus, Hizb ut-Tahrir as an organisation has a more defined blueprint for achieving religious states. Former Islamist Ed Husain, re-

counts the group’s more defined strategy as an attractive feature of his transition to Jamaat-e-Islami linked activism into Hizb ut-Tahrir⁵⁰. It should be noted however that Hizb ut-Tahrir does not usually advocate this revolutionary approach in Western states with Muslim minority populations.



Restoring the Caliphate and Implementing Sharia: Islamist Strategies		
Salafi-Jihadists	Revivalists & Gradualists	Revolutionaries
<p>Islamic State:</p> <p>Sought to capture and control territory through offensive Jihad, declared the territory it held as the Caliphate.</p> <p>Additionally pursued a strategy of direct confrontation with Western states by inspiring and directing terror plots around the world.</p> <p>Al-Qaeda:</p> <p>Sought to wage war against ‘Zionist-Crusader’ alliance of the United States and its allies. Saw attacks against these states as a prologue to the Caliphate.</p> <p>Al-Qaeda affiliates around the world have captured and held territory through waging of offensive Jihad, implementing Sharia in territory under their control</p>	<p>In the West, unaligned ‘revivalist’ groups and those linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami seek to bring about an ‘Islamic revival’, a revival of Islamic identity and values (according to their interpretation) which would naturally precede an Islamic state in which Sharia is fully implemented.</p> <p>In the West, although the groups encourage a certain degree of participation in society, key Brotherhood leaders have advocated for cultural and religious barriers to be erected between Muslim communities and wider society. These communities would fall under the sway of Islamist leaders.</p>	<p>Hizb ut-Tahrir:</p> <p>Agitates for the overthrow of “corrupt” regimes in Muslim majority countries. Has a deliberate strategy to infiltrate the armed forces of certain countries in preparation for a coup. Is active in Western countries including Britain and has attracted thousands of supporters to rallies in the past.</p>

50: Ed Husain, The Islamist

The Challenge of an Islamic State

The political nature of the Islamist worldview has been somewhat downplayed in Western policymaking circles in recent years. While it might be widely accepted that Marxist-Leninist actors on the far-left of the political spectrum seek to overthrow democracy and replace it with a “dictatorship of the proletariat”⁵¹, or that white supremacists seek to replace the status quo with a white ethno-state, it should also be accepted that (in a Western context) Islamists seek to challenge the very notion and legitimacy of democracy as a form of governance and replace it with their own.

In the words of French Islamism expert, Hakim el-Karoui, Islamists are, quite literally, trying to create an alternative society. This is politics. Human beings have fought, killed and died over visions of society⁵² and ordering society throughout history, in this respect, Islamists should not be made into an exceptional case, and the challenge of the more violent elements of the global Islamist movement should not be depoliticised.

Like the Marxist-Leninist ideal of the “workers’ paradise”, Islamists envisage the religious state and global Islamic “Caliphate” to replace the existing system as their own ideal. Some Islamists are willing to work within democratic frameworks in order to achieve this eventual objective, while others advocate for revolutionary overthrow of regimes or offensive Jihad.

There is a key distinction to be made here: conservative Islamic belief is not necessarily at odds with democratic values, but Islamism as a political belief system and alternative to democracy is a direct challenge to democratic systems of governance.

The Democratic Dilemma

The spread and popularity of this alternative order presents a complex challenge for democratic states. Democracies must maintain freedom of belief, speech and association, but at the same time, in order for democracies to properly function, a majority of citizens must ascribe to the same set of foundational values. At times this paradox has been expressed as simply as: to what extent should intolerance be tolerated?

In the UK context, the system of governance and order of society which Islamists advocate is antithetical to the Fundamental British Values identified by the UK government and expressed in both the Prevent Strategy⁵³ and the Counter-Extremism Strategy⁵⁴.

Even the most ‘democratic’ interpretations of the ideal Islamic state, as outlined by the more moderate wings of leading Islamism groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, are not democratic in any sense that would be recognised in the West, and would not grant equal voting rights between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens⁵⁵. This represents a considerable departure from the democratic nation-state, which establishes citizenship within territorial boundaries as the guarantor of individual rights and freedoms, rather than ethnicity or religion.

Unlike the more revolutionary and violent groups, some British gradualists and revivalists claim not to advocate direct contravention of existing norms and values, but have produced literature and other material advocating for interpretations of Islam and the Sharia which would exist in their ‘ideal Islamic state’. In certain instances, this has again run contrary to the fundamental British values outlined by the government, such as calling for the death sentence for apostates and homosexuals⁵⁶.

Islamists will often claim to only be advocating for such measures if certain conditions are met, such as due process once the ideal Islamic State has been achieved. Therefore, when challenged in public, they will neither condemn nor condone such punishments, but talk in abstracts instead⁵⁷.

This is not to say that Islamist groups should be criminalised or securitised, but that it is in the interests of democratic states and a healthy civil society to challenge these beliefs and narratives with greater precision and energy.

51: Hal Draper, The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/marxmyths/hal-draper/article2.htm>

52: Gavin Mortimer, “Macron is quick to take on nationalism. What about Islamism?,” The Spectator, September 18 2018 <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/macron-is-quick-to-take-on-nationalism-what-about-islamism->

53: “Prevent Strategy,” HM Government, June 2011 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf

54: “Counter-Extremism Strategy,” HM Government, October 2015 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470088/51859_Cm9148_Accessible.pdf

55: Lorenzo Vidino, The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West pp.60-61 see discussion of Rashid Ghannouchi: “It seems apparent that Westerns and the New Muslim Brothers use the same word, “democracy”, but their definitions and interpretations are quite different.”

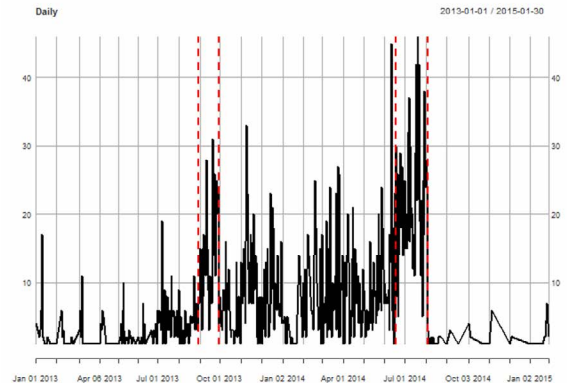
56: Ibrahim Hewitt, “What Does Islam Say?,” The Muslim Educational Trust, April 2004. Archived at: <http://www.hurryupharry.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/ibrahim-hewitt.pdf>

57: See for example a well known exchange on BBC Newsnight between Jeremy Paxman, Maajid Nawaz and Ibrahim Hewitt: “What should be taught in Muslim schools? – Newsnight,” BBC Newsnight YouTube, June 4 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JlUMY8l6bE>

Mobilising for the Caliphate

The spread of the utopian Caliphate ideal has had significant and underexplored implications for democratic states. This was most obviously and painfully demonstrated by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's 2014 bold declaration of its restoration, as thousands more fighters and recruits were inspired not only by the triumphalism of the message, but by the resonance the concept of the Caliphate carries⁵⁸.

In the chart (right) from independent conflict researcher Jared F Edgerton, the biggest spike in mobilisation to join Islamic State from around the world came in the summer of 2014. This coincides almost precisely with the height of the group's powers, media attention, and the July 2014⁵⁹ Caliphate declaration by IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. From the pulpit of Mosul Mosque, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared the revival of the Islamic state:



“O Muslims everywhere, glad tidings to you and expect good. Raise your head high, for today – by Allah’s grace – you have a state and khilāfah, which will return your dignity, might, rights and leadership.

“O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory.”⁶⁰

Part of the IS recruitment narrative advertised their “Caliphate” as a legitimate place to come and live. As opposed to simply recruiting for terror training camps as Al-Qaeda had done in the past, IS publicised the quality of life on offer to those who made the obligatory hijrah (migration)⁶¹.

This narrative that the Islamic State was a viable place to live succeeded in attracting not just large numbers of men, but policymakers were also caught off guard by large numbers of women, girls and even entire families travelling to the new self-declared “Caliphate”.

The fact that such significant numbers, including some 5,000 Europeans, many of them women and some families, were moved by Baghdadi’s call from the pulpit of Mosul Mosque may suggest that the Caliphate, and the notion of a divinely sanctioned Islamic state governed according to a specific interpretation of Sharia carried greater resonance than has previously been explored. Of course, it is also necessary to account for the media attention and the apparent might of the group during the same period.



An entire family from Luton, England made 'hijra' to Islamic State, from toddlers to grandparents.

Source: The Independent⁶²

58: Daniel L. Byman, “Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets,” Brookings, April 29 2015.

<https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/>

59: Jared F. Edgerton, “Social Networks and Violence,” Jared F. Edgerton website, <https://jaredfedgerton.net/#/research-projects/>

60: Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, “A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the month of Ramadan,” Al Hayat Media Center, July 1 2014.

61: “Islamic State NHS-style hospital video posted,” BBC News, April 24 2015 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-32456789>

62: Tom Brooks-Pollock, “‘Yes we have joined Isis’ say missing British family of 12 who fled to Syria,” The Independent, July 4 2015 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/yes-we-have-joined-isis-say-missing-british-family-of-12-who-fled-to-syria-luton-islamic-state-isis-10365915.html>

The ideal of the Caliphate is more widespread and has deeper roots in Britain than simply Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's 2014 declaration. The possibility that for individuals for whom this long-term vision (which they scarcely expected to see in their own lifetime) suddenly becoming a reality represented a tremendous draw cannot be discounted, and should be investigated further.

It is important to note again that in examining the appeal of the Caliphate, this does not seek to make a moral or political judgement on the concept of a Caliphate, nor to label all who aspire to its creation as an extremist, simply to understand that this is a vision of ordering society which differs considerably from Western liberal democratic frameworks and notions of human rights.

Establishing Sharia Overseas

“When I come here you feel a sense of satisfaction, you are fulfilling your duty. You feel that you are doing what the Prophet Muhammad and his companions did fourteen hundred years ago. You feel that you achieved something.”⁶³

– *Unknown British foreign fighter in Bosnia*



It is possible to draw inferences about the ideological appeal of fighting to control territory and implement Sharia among British Islamists from other conflicts. Prior to Islamic State, British extremists could be found fighting in fourteen different regions around the world since the 1990s, including, but not limited to: Bosnia, Afghanistan, India, Kashmir, Pakistan, Chechnya, Somalia and Yemen⁶⁴.

At times, Islamist groups in the West have facilitated and organised this travel overseas to fight, while others have been ambivalent and have certainly not been publicly condemned. The Dutch domestic intelligence agency the AIVD recognised that while real distance was observed between the domestic Islamists and the Jihadists calling for attacks on home soil, the attitude towards fighting overseas was more ambiguous:

“As for support for fellow Muslims in conflict zones, a more ambivalent attitude could be observed. Taking up arms against those who attack Islam is clearly authorised under Islamic law, and sometimes even regarded as necessary, but the radical *dawa* in the Netherlands no longer calls openly for this form of Jihad – although it certainly does not condemn it, either.”⁶⁵

Of course, the realities of Muslim suffering in many of these conflict zones has proved a powerful recruitment narrative for extremist groups, as was seen with the first travellers to the conflicts in Bosnia and later in the Syrian civil war for example⁶⁶. Even then, despite the initial motivation, British recruits sought to influence events according to their political aims, such as through joining groups implementing Sharia in territory under their control.

Others who were motivated to take up arms in defence of Muslim suffering would only fall deeper into extremist activity, such as East Londoner Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, who would go on to receive a death sentence for his part in the beheading of American journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002. The influence of the narrative of defending Islam will be returned to later in this paper.

As much as the flow of foreign fighters to Islamic State was unprecedented in its scale, it was anything but unprecedented when viewed holistically. Explanations for the phenomenon must look deeper than simply effective propaganda, and consider the ideological resonance of Islamic State's battlefield dominance and importantly, Caliphate declaration.

63: From a popular extremist video showing an unknown British fighter named Abu Ibrahim in Bosnia

64: Paul Stott, “British Jihadism: The Detail and the Denial,” (Thesis, University of East Anglia) https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/53460/1/British_Jihadism_The_Detail_and_The_Denial.pdf

65: “The radical *dawa* in transition: The rise of Islamic neoradicalism in the Netherlands,” Central Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), October 2007 file: <http://C:/Users/44746/Downloads/theradicaldawaitransition.pdf>

66: https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2784_Western_foreign_fighters_V7_WEB.pdf

For a number of years there has been a significant undercurrent of support in British Islamism for those attempting to establish Sharia in Muslim majority countries while rejecting terrorism against civilians in Britain⁶⁷. Indeed, influential former Guantanamo inmate Moazzam Begg, who had previously travelled to Bosnia in the 1990s, travelled with his family to live under the Taliban in Afghanistan in summer 2001, writing in his autobiography:

“When I went to Afghanistan, I believed the Taliban had made some modest progress – in social justice and in upholding pure, old style Islamic values forgotten in many Islamic countries.”⁶⁸

Many more Britons have successfully travelled overseas in recent years than have been mobilised to violence within the UK. In a sample of British Jihadists, research from the Tony Blair Institute found that the majority had spent time overseas, with 64% having fought in one of three major hubs: East Africa (Somalia/Kenya), Syria/Iraq or Afghanistan/Pakistan⁶⁹.

Even outspoken Islamist agitators like Anjem Choudary’s Al-Muhajiroun who have openly supported Jihadist groups have refrained from calling for attacks against Britain, sometimes citing the principle of the ‘Covenant of Security’⁷⁰. However, to what extent this covenant holds after the group’s leadership swore allegiance to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and Islamic State – which called relentlessly for attacks in the West – is up for debate⁷¹.

Beyond Al-Muhajiroun, among the leading Islamic revivalists and non-violent Islamists of Britain Baghdad’s “Caliphate” declaration was largely rejected, while the ideal of the Caliphate itself was not.

For example, speaking on Islam Channel in September 2014, popular scholar Haitham Al-Haddad described IS as “un-Islamic”, but did maintain that the creation of an Islamic Caliphate was nonetheless an “Islamic obligation”⁷². Haitham Al-Haddad is a prominent figure on the speaking and preaching circuit in the UK, and has publicly called for the Caliphate on a number of occasions⁷³.

In the same television segment on Islam Channel, another popular figure interviewed alongside Haitham Al-Haddad, while condemning Islamic State, said that the debate around the group meant that “Muslims have now realised just how realistic a Caliphate can be”⁷⁴.

Even with prominent individuals in the UK Islamist scene condemning Islamic State’s “Caliphate”, it is clear that the Caliphate as both an Islamic obligation and utopian ideal is one which British Islamists and Islamic revivalists are eager to push for, and at the very least not be seen to undermine. Islamic State’s territorial “Caliphate” may have been defeated, but the ideal of a Caliphate is very much alive.



Still from a video which sought to attack Muslim ‘reformers’, alleging that they were delegitimising the concept of a Caliphate. The video also criticised the reformers for seeking to “erase the concept of physical Jihad”. In the video, various European countries which are not Muslim majority countries or formerly territory of a Caliphate can also be seen as included in the aspirational map of the Caliphate⁷⁵.

67: Paul Stott, “British Jihadism: The Detail and the Denial”

68: Moazzam Begg, *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantanamo, Bagram, and Kandahar*. p.381

69: Rachel Bryson, “For Caliph and Country: Exploring How British Jihadis Join a Global Movement,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/articles/For-Caliph-and-Country-Exploring-How-British-Jihadis-Join-a-Global-Movement-.pdf>

70: The covenant of security is an Islamic principle adopted by Al-Muhajiroun, with their stance on it outlined in a 2010 press release: “as Muslims in Britain, we live among you under a covenant of security; in return for our lives and wealth being protected we are not permitted to attack the lives and wealth of the non-Muslims with whom we live.” Catherine Zara Raymond, “Al Muhajiroun and Islam4UK: The group behind the ban,” ICSR, May 2010. p.7 <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/ICSR-Feature-Al-Muhajiroun-and-Islam4UK-The-group-behind-the-ban.pdf>

71: In 2016 Anjem Choudary was convicted of supporting Islamic State: Jamie Grierson, Vikram Dodd and Jason Rodrigues, “Anjem Choudary convicted of supporting Islamic State,” *The Guardian*, 16 August 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/aug/16/anjem-choudary-convicted-of-supporting-islamic-state>

72: “The Report Episode 68 | Part 2/2 (08/09/14) - Caliphates and Islamic State(s),” Islam Channel YouTube, 8 September 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P4oBiZ0bGk&feature=youtu.be>

73: Imam Sheikh Dr Usama Hasan, David Toubé, Muna Khan, “Mainstreaming Islamism: Islamist Institutions and Civil Society Organisations,” HM Government, September 2019 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/836965/mainstreaming-islamism-islamist-institutions-and-civil-society-organisations.pdf

74: “The Report Episode 68 | Part 2/2 (08/09/14) - Caliphates and Islamic State(s),” Islam Channel YouTube

75: Tweet: “5Pillars: Exposing and accounting deformists since 2013. Support the work in defending Islam and Muslims in the media: <http://5pillarsuk.com/donate/>”, 5Pillars, May 19 2020 <https://twitter.com/5Pillarsuk/status/1262804981498904579> [accessed May 20 2020]

3: War on Islam



“I further admit my allegiance to Osama bin Laden, to Islam, and to the religion of Allah. With regards to what you said about killing innocent people, I will say one thing. Your government has killed 2 million children in Iraq. If you want to think about something, against 2 million, I don’t see no comparison.

“Your government has sponsored the rape and torture of Muslims in the prisons of Egypt and Turkey and Syria and Jordan with their money and with their weapons. I don’t know, see what I done as being equal to rape and to torture, or to the deaths of the two million children in Iraq.

“So, for this reason, I think I ought not apologize for my actions. I am at war with your country. I’m at war with them not for personal reasons but because they have murdered more than, so many children and they have oppressed my religion and they have oppressed people for no reason except that they say we believe in Allah. This is the only reason that America sponsors Egypt. It’s the only reason they sponsor Turkey. It’s the only reason they back Israel.”⁷⁶

– Richard Reid, the “Shoe Bomber”



The paper will now turn to the Islamist narrative of a war on Islam and Muslims, a narrative which is inextricably linked to the professed solution of taking up arms in defence of Islam and Muslims, and the eventual creation of an Islamic State.

As a result, this section will also discuss justifications for armed violence used by those Islamists commonly understood to be “non-violent”, demonstrating that non-violence is a strategic and contextual position rather than necessarily a principled one.

The most open interpretations of Jihad come from the likes of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, who justify waging offensive Jihad both to spread Islam and to defend Muslims they claim are under global attack.

Most Islamist groups do not necessarily share the worldview that this iteration of global Jihad is justified, but will and have justified violence in other more specific circumstances, such as in Bosnia during the 1990s, or in Gaza against Israel. They also can be found propagating the idea that the West is culturally and militarily subjugating the Muslim world, if not in open war against it. This runs the risk of inadvertently justifying violence to followers, as defending Muslims and Islam is a “just cause” in many interpretations of Islam.

Particularly through the foreign policy lens, this narrative has been highly animating for Islamist groups across the spectrum, and there is a litany of Western terrorists who have cited perceived Western actions against Islam and Muslims in order to justify their actions.

In his martyrdom video, the 7/7 London bombings ringleader Mohammed Sidique Khan, from West Yorkshire, declared that he was: “directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters”. He went on to echo Bin Laden’s Crusader-Zionist conspiracy, calling his attack a slap in the face of “Crusader British arrogance”⁷⁷.

The likes of Sayyid Qutb, the ‘father of Jihadism’, Abdullah Azzam and Osama Bin Laden were instrumental in formulating the justifications for militancy in response to a perceived Western war on Islam and Muslims, and their views have been touched on in previous sections, not least the conspiratorial and antisemitic notion of a “Crusader-Zionist” alliance.

76: “Reid: ‘I am at war with your country’”, CNN, Jan 21 2003 <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/LAW/01/31/reid.transcript/>

77: Vikram Dodd and Richard Norton-Taylor, “Video of 7/7 ringleader blames foreign policy”, The Guardian, Sept 2 2005 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/02/alqaida.politics>

Below, the paper will explore the impact and promotion of this narrative in a British and Western context from various Islamist actors. While many Islamist actors stop short of selling the inflammatory and conspiratorial notion of a Crusader-Zionist alliance, and their intentions may be a long way from contributing to violent radicalisation or mimicking Salafi-Jihadi narratives, there is nonetheless significant overlap. What's more, the more limited justifications for violence or narratives of a War on Islam propagated by non-violent Islamists beg the question, if military Jihad is justified in Gaza or Bosnia, then why not in other conflict zones too? Why not against Western targets if Islam is also under assault from the West, as many Islamists claim?

The Iraq War and Alliance with the Left



MAB & STWC placards on Iraq and Palestine side by side.

One of the objectives of the most divisive interpretations of this narrative is to connect various disparate conflicts and incidents into a pattern or conspiracy of oppression and repression against Muslims, which the West is ultimately responsible for. A notable expression of this in Britain came in the early 2000s, through outfits such as the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) and former Labour MP George Galloway's RESPECT party.

Stop the War, a movement dominated by members of the Socialist Workers Party, formed a pragmatic alliance with the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003⁷⁸. The MAB has been described by Lorenzo Vidino as a “quintessential New Western [Muslim] Brotherhood organization in its origins, ideology, connections and methodology”⁷⁹.

Vidino explains how STWC were impressed by MAB's capacity to mobilise, having led a large anti-Israel protest in central London in 2002 which saw the flags of Hezbollah and Hamas flown in contrast to the burning of Israeli and American flags⁸⁰. This trend further emphasises the connection between the United States and Israel (and by extension the oppression of Muslims in Palestine) in the Islamist narrative.

In the run up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the influence of MAB (a number of whom have expressed support for Hamas) on STWC was keenly felt, as opposition to the Iraq War was linked explicitly to the Palestinian issue in their activism, through slogans and placards which read: “Freedom for Palestine, Stop the War in Iraq”⁸¹.

For the far-left, the Islamist opposition to the United States and Israel, including the narrative of various foreign policy issues and humanitarian crises attributable to the actions of those countries found a sympathetic audience among far-left “anti-Imperialists”, who saw the world in much the same terms, but minus the theological grounding.

The success of the opportunistic alliance between the far-left and Islamists was formalised with the RESPECT party in 2004. Left-wing writer Nick Cohen was scathing in his assessment of STWC and RESPECT, saying they represented an alliance between “the Trotskyist far-left and the Islamic far-right, which produced the most disgraceful protest movement since the Thirties”. Cohen also described the anti-American worldview of RESPECT's main figure, George Galloway, as supporting “every anti-American tyrant on the planet”⁸².

78: Edward Platt, “Comrades at War: the decline and fall of the Socialist Workers Party”, New Statesman, May 20 2014 <https://www.new-statesman.com/politics/2014/05/comrades-war-decline-and-fall-socialist-workers-party>

79: Vidino p.140

80: Ibid p.141

81: Ibid p. 142-3

82: Nick Cohen, “Galloway Can No Longer Count on the Indulgence of Polite Society”, The Observer, Jan 15 2006 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/jan/15/realitytv.bigbrother>

Foreign Policy and the War on Terror

“Foreign policy is perhaps the key ingredient of framing the victimhood narrative in Jihadist circles. The USA - controlled by Zionists - has absolute control over the world, and especially the Arab regimes. In Jihadist narratives, the USA crafts policy with the purpose of preventing Muslims from practicing their religion in accordance with Islamist interpretations (which if enacted, would lead to global prosperity and tranquillity for Muslims). The foreign policy grievance is key to melding theology and radical politics.”⁸³

– *Jesse Morton, Former Jihadi Propagandist*

It is on this anti-American and “anti-Zionist” narrative that the far-left and various Islamist movements have found common ground. The overlapping worldview of Islamists and the far-left – and even an attitude of general anti-Americanism which can be found on the centre-left and the right, has amplified and mainstreamed elements of the narrative which Islamists seek to promote. Indeed, even the Guardian newspaper has published opinion pieces and letters from Islamist groups deriding Western foreign policy as a driver of terrorism⁸⁴.

Islamists’ outspoken opposition to Western foreign policy has therefore found a sympathetic hearing in the mainstream and bolstered their support base among the far-left. A research paper published by the UK’s Commission for Countering Extremism found a positive relationship between “anti-imperialist ideology” and support for violent extremism among the far-left, and the belief among the far-left that the US, UK, Israel and NATO presented a greater threat to world peace than their adversaries⁸⁵. This view differs in its intellectual origins to the Islamist view but is similar in terms of the “final product”.

Like the quote above from former Jihadi propagandist Jesse Morton, terrorism scholar Dina Al-Raffie has argued that foreign policy is one of the principle hooks deployed by Islamists in the West, explaining how they seek to:



“Frame foreign policies of host nations as intentional affronts against the homeland [targeting 2nd and 3rd generation migrants] within the framework of a holy war. In this instance, it is not the country per se that is being attacked, but the religion.

“Framing politics this way aims to sensitize Muslims to their religious identities in a manner intrinsically bound to politics. The more adherents internalize this political outlook, the more radicalization becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Trained to view the world through a religious ‘us vs. them’ lens, each negative political event involving Muslims reinforces the initial belief. And so, instead of being able to critically evaluate events in their lives, Muslims are increasingly indoctrinated to view themselves as passive victims of a powerful conspiracy targeting their religion.”⁸⁶

A number of domestic groups in the UK and in other Western countries have sought to synonymise the War on Terror that was unleashed after 9/11 as really a War on Islam. A milestone report ‘Narratives of Division’, by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI) found extensive evidence of UK-based organisations and figures promoting the divisive narrative of opposition between the West and Islam, particularly in terms of foreign policy⁸⁷.

83: Correspondence with Jesse Morton conducted April 28 2020. Photo source: C-SPAN

84: “What turns some Islamists to terror”, The Guardian, Apr 26 2008 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/apr/26/uksecurity>

85: Daniel Allington, Siobhan McAndrew, and David Hirsh, “Violent Extremist Tactics and the Ideology of the Sectarian Far-Left”, Commission for Countering Extremism, July 2019 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/834429/Allington-McAndrew-Hirsh-2019-Jul-19.pdf

86: Al-Raffie, “The Identity-Extremism Nexus” pp.8-9

87: “Narratives of Division: The Spectrum of Islamist Worldviews in the UK”, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, Jan 18 2019 <https://institute.global/policy/narratives-division-spectrum-islamist-worldviews-uk>

The now-proscribed Al-Muhajiroun, led by Anjem Choudary, has pushed the Western war on Islam narrative more than most. The group's founder, former Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir activist Omar Bakri Mohammed was once asked what would happen in a "fight to the finish" between the United States and "the Salafis" (referring to Salafi-Jihadis), he replied: "Allah knows best, however, our main concern is to please Allah, and to die in the cause of Allah and go to Jannah (Paradise). If the U.S. continues with her policy against Islam and the Muslim world, Muslims will be more inclined to strike blows against America." In the same interview he discussed the number of Muslims being slaughtered by America around the world⁸⁸.

His successor, Anjem Choudary, embraced and enflamed this Manichean worldview, blaming British and American foreign policy for a number of domestic attacks, and claiming not to have any sympathy for those killed due to their rejection of Islam and support for elected governments committing the alleged abuses around the world⁸⁹.

The Tony Blair Institute research found that a number of other activist groups and organisations, including Hizb ut-Tahrir and those which fit Islamism expert Damon L. Perry's definition of revivalists, have also promoted narratives which overlap considerably with this Islam vs. West narrative.

88: Mahan Abedin, "Al-Muhajiroun in the UK: An interview with Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed", The Jamestown Foundation, March 23 2004 <https://jamestown.org/interview/al-muhajiroun-in-the-uk-an-interview-with-sheikh-omar-bakri-mohammed/>

89: "Narratives of Division", Tony Blair Institute pp.19-26

90: Ibid p.30

We are at war



“That is Islam, my brother: you kill my brothers, I kill you”

- Toulouse terrorist Mohammed Merah's (2012) words to French soldier Imad Ibn Ziaten after killing him.



“I think he saw children - Muslim children - dying everywhere, and wanted revenge. He saw the explosives America drops on children in Syria, and he wanted revenge. Whether he got that is between him and God.”

- Manchester Arena bomber
Salman Abedi's sister

“The only reason we've killed this man today is because Muslims are dying daily by British soldiers. This British soldier is one - he is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

- Fusilier Lee Rigby's killer
Michael Adebolajo



“With regards to what you said about killing innocent people, I will say one thing. Your government has killed 2 million children in Iraq. If you want to think about something, against 2 million, I don't see no comparison.

“Your government has sponsored the rape and torture of Muslims in the prisons of Egypt and Turkey and Syria and Jordan with their money and with their weapons. I don't know, see what I done as being equal to rape and to torture, or to the deaths of the two million children in Iraq. So, for this reason, I think I ought not apologize for my actions. I am at war with your country.”

- “Shoe Bomber” Richard Reid at trial in Boston, Jan 2003



“I am directly responsible for avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters”

- 7/7 London bomber Muhammad Sidique Khan

Shades of Grey: British Islamist Justifications for Violence

The perceived war on Muslims and war on Islam has been an animating narrative since the earliest days of the Islamist movement, and an explicitly more militant version has been honed over the years by the likes of Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, Osama Bin Laden and Anwar Al-Awlaki. Specifically, as taking up arms in defence of Islam and Muslims is considered a “just cause” for a much wider constituency than just Salafi-Jihadists, propagating the narratives that the West is at war with Islam (and oppressing Muslims at home) is a dangerous recipe which could provide the justification for armed violence, in the absence of actually saying it out loud.

British Islamists and revivalists have a tradition of making both cases separately without connecting the two – that there is deliberate oppression of Muslims led by the West, and that Islam permits taking up arms in its defence. This is hugely problematic because it falls short of calling for violence (which would be prosecuted under terrorism legislation), but leaves the interpretation down to the audience. If one is told in different contexts that there is a war on Islam and that Jihad is an obligation to defend Islam and Muslims, the connection is not a stretch to make.

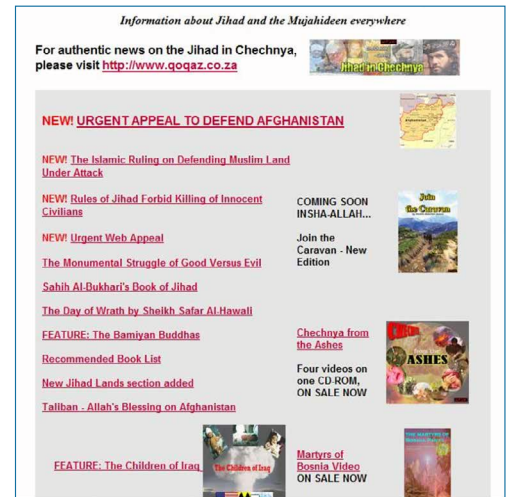
Figures like Abdullah Azzam, the veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war and father of modern Jihadism, have made a deep impression on the British Islamist movement. Abdullah Azzam’s ‘The Defence of Muslim Lands’ was a bestseller at former Guantanamo detainee Moazzam Begg’s Maktabah Al-Ansar bookshop in Birmingham – Begg himself apparently regarded the text as “magisterial”⁹¹.

Azzam’s legacy was so keenly felt on the British Islamist scene that the hugely popular website for Islamist literature and news, Azzam.com (Azzam Publications), took its name from the iconic Jihadist⁹². The website’s administrator, South Londoner Babar Ahmed, admitted that “the purpose of Azzam Publications [was] to ‘incite the believers’ and also secondly to raise some money for the brothers” – referring to mujahideen fighters in various conflict zones⁹³.

In the spirit of Azzam’s call to defend Muslim lands, the website promoted various Islamist movements around the world, as well as the Taliban in Afghanistan. A screenshot from four days after the 9/11 attacks shows references to various conflicts involving Islamists including an “URGENT APPEAL TO DEFEND AFGHANISTAN”⁹⁴ (pictured above).

More recently, the landmark 2016 court case of the BBC vs. Shakeel Begg, demonstrated the extent to which the influential leader of Lewisham Islamic Centre in South-East London has flirted with explicit calls and justifications for violence. In this case, the BBC successfully defended its labelling of Shakeel Begg as an ‘extremist’, as the Hon. Mr Justice Haddon-Cave ruled that Begg’s statements constituted: “espousing extremist Islamic positions, and promoting and encouraging violent Jihad in the name of Islam”⁹⁵. The case and its findings were summarised in the UK Commission for Countering Extremism’s ‘Challenging Hateful Extremism’ report:

“Mr Justice Haddon-Cave ruled that Begg had engaged in a ‘consistent pattern of behaviour’ of espousing extremist views, concluding that Begg had encouraged ‘religious violence by telling Muslims that violence in support of Islam would constitute a man’s greatest deed’.”⁹⁶



91: Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “Moazzam Begg and Abdullah Azzam: Part Two”, Standpoint, 17 February 2002 <https://standpointmag.co.uk/moazzam-begg-and-abdullah-azzam-part-two/>

92: Azzam Publications has since been taken offline.

93: “British Nationals Who Supported Terrorism are Sentenced”, FBI, 16 July 2014 <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/newhaven/news/press-releases/british-nationals-who-supported-terrorism-are-sentenced>

94: Screenshot archived at Harry’s Place blog, June 3 2011 <http://hurryupharry.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Azzam-Publications-for-Jihad-and-the-Mujahideen.jpeg>

95: Shakeel Begg v BBC [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB) - Judgment 28 October 2016 p.74 <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/shakeel-begg-v-bbc-judgment-final-20161028.pdf>

96: “Challenging Hateful Extremism”, Commission for Countering Extremism, October 2019 p.74 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874101/200320_Challenging_Hateful_Extremism.pdf

Shakeel Begg, although a long way from the ideology of groups like Islamic State, clearly does not eschew the principle of engaging in Jihad overseas, even praising “the virtues and ‘good deeds’ of these Jihadis who have travelled to conflict zones and engaged in armed struggle in the name of Islam”, although there is no evidence of supporting attacks at home⁹⁷. As covered in the previous section, this principle of encouraging Jihad overseas to implement Sharia but denouncing terrorism at home has a long tradition in British Islamism.

In addition, Begg has promoted a Manichean world view between Islam/Muslims and the West. This has most often come in reference to domestic policies and the situation of Muslims in Britain, but nonetheless contributes to the perception of persecution and oppression at the hands of the West, which in tandem with his justifications for violence pose the risk of planting “the seed of Islamic extremism in a young mind”, as Mr Justice Haddon-Cave put it⁹⁸.

Further than just Begg, the Commission for Countering Extremism found that UK based groups associated with both the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami had refused to outright condemn terrorism and terror attacks in certain scenarios, or had even “praised or equivocated on the use of violence” by organisations such as Hamas⁹⁹.

In a similar vein, the British Government’s 2015 review into the Muslim Brotherhood concluded the following:

“People associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in the UK have applauded suicide bombing by Hamas, in some cases against civilians. Hamas terrorist activities have not been publicly disowned or condemned. Muslim Brotherhood organisations and associates in the UK have neither openly nor consistently refuted the literature of Brotherhood member Sayyid Qutb which is known to have inspired people (including in this country) to engage in terrorism.”¹⁰⁰

It is clear that the foundation for the justification of violence in defence of Islam and Muslims is more widespread (although the scenarios are more limited) than simply among Islamic State, Al-Qaeda or Al-Muhajiroun networks in the United Kingdom.

These narratives create a “shades of grey” situation, whereby political-religious violence is justified if the correct conditions are met, leaving a great deal down to individual and group interpretation. For example, if an armed response is justifiable over Gaza, then why not against the United States or Britain, if they are allies of Israel, or waging a Global War on Terror which is really a war on Muslims? This is made all the more challenging by the narrative of global oppression that Islamist groups deploy – the flames of which are fanned by very real atrocities and human rights abuses carried out against Muslims by regimes around the world.

In some ways, the transition of Anwar Al-Awlaki from US Government partner after 9/11, to a man who minimised terror attacks through the foreign policy prism, to later adopting the black and white worldview of the West/United States vs. Islam, all the way to becoming a chief Al-Qaeda propagandist and recruiter is emblematic of the danger of this narrative. As Awlaki specialist Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens explained:

“His final embrace of the most extreme expressions of Islamism was, [...] a painless one which required only a minute adjustment to a set of beliefs deemed progressive and moderate enough by those who invited him to speak at the Pentagon.”¹⁰¹

97: Begg v BBC 2016

98: Begg v BBC 2016

99: “Challenging Hateful Extremism” p.43

100: “Muslim Brotherhood Review: Main Findings,” HM Government, Dec 17 2005 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/486932/Muslim_Brotherhood_Review_Main_Findings.pdf

101: Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar Al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2011 <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/ICSR-Report-As-American-As-Apple-Pie-How-Anwar-al-Awlaki-Became-the-Face-of-Western-Jihad.pdf>

4: Communities Under Siege



“There is a substantial network of political Islamist groups – often describing themselves as advocacy and human rights organisations – which have developed and promoted narratives and a sense of grievance that attempt to undermine Western values and, by frequently accusing the state of persecuting Muslims and the Islamic faith, have sought to set Muslim citizens apart from the rest of society.

“Frequently funded through individual charitable donations, these groups’ business model is based on presenting a picture of persecution and oppression of Muslims in Britain, with a heavy-handed state blamed for all forms of inequality or obstacles faced by Muslims. Their messages push an extremist narrative that the West and the UK Government are systematically trying to subjugate and harm Muslims, establishing a security state that needs to be opposed at all costs.”¹⁰²

– *The Casey Review, HM Government*

Overlapping considerably with the narrative of the global war on Islam and Muslims, many Islamist groups in Britain and the West consistently propagate a narrative that Muslims are heavily oppressed and persecuted domestically. Very real developments and concern over racism, bigotry and discrimination towards Muslims are routinely inflated and inflamed for political gain, while, as identified by social welfare expert Dame Louise Casey, state counter-terrorism efforts and efforts to challenge the social agenda of non-violent Islamists are framed as state persecution. Former Prime Minister David Cameron identified these narratives in his 2015 speech on Islamist extremism as narratives of ‘grievance’, peddled by both violent and non-violent extremists alike¹⁰³.

Lorenzo Vidino explained the tactic and its potential to contribute to violent radicalisation from the Muslim Brotherhood perspective:

“The Brotherhood promotes a narrative that, through its use of victimhood and justification of violence, creates a fertile environment for radicalisation. Western Brotherhood entities have purposely exaggerated anti-Muslim incidents and attitudes (which unquestionably exist) to foster a siege mentality within local Muslim communities, arguing that the government and Western societies are hostile to them.”

Creating grievance narratives surrounding domestic policies allows non-violent Islamist groups to foster the sense of alienation and anger they seek to, but also claim state policies which are not in their interest are motivated by racism and bigotry, making it more difficult for people to criticise their agenda.

To give one example of this particular tactic, the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), featured in the Tony Blair Institute research ‘Narratives of Division’, has described concern from government over Sharia councils as: “part of a wide, insidious and relentless attack on the whole Muslim way of life under the pretext of security and anti-terrorism”¹⁰⁵.

102: Dame Louise Casey CBE, “The Casey Review: A review into opportunity and integration”, HM Government, December 2016 p.144 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575973/The_Casey_Review_Report.pdf

103: David Cameron, “Extremism: PM speech,” HM Government, 20 July 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/extremism-pm-speech>

104: Lorenzo Vidino, “The Muslim Brotherhood in Austria”, George Washington University Program on Extremism, August 2017 p.3

105: IHRC, ‘A letter to Nick Clegg regarding the government’s proposed new plans to “combat Islamic extremism”’, IHRC website, March 11 2015. www.ihrc.org.uk/activities/campaigns/11382-a-letter-to-nick-clegg-regarding-the-governments-proposed-new-plans-to-combat-islamic-extremism

Other organisations have highlighted individual cases of extremists coming to the attention of security services and the police, supposedly for little other reason than being Muslim. Sometimes this narrative has attracted national press attention, highlighting how Muslims allegedly simply going on safari trips to East Africa are being hassled by security services – when in reality, a number of Britons have travelled to or attempted to travel to East Africa to join Al-Qaeda’s Somali affiliate Al-Shabaab¹⁰⁶.

This narrative was most notoriously deployed in the defence of Muhammed Emwazi, otherwise known as Jihadi John, the Isis executioner responsible for the murder of British, American and Japanese civilians. It was claimed by controversial advocacy group Cage that Emwazi was radicalised by the security services – including his stoppage on an attempted ‘safari’ trip¹⁰⁷.

The UK’s Prevent Strategy and Counter-Extremism Strategy have been used as a cornerstone of this narrative, with the implication that state efforts to prevent radicalisation and to counter-extremism are a cover for a state surveillance program targeted at Muslims. Organisations like Cage have woven Prevent into a broader international narrative alongside the United States drone program and the Guantanamo Bay detention facility¹⁰⁸.

Organisations like MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development) have also popularised the notion that Prevent demonises Muslims to such an extent that senior Labour Party figures have appeared on platforms which amplify this particular narrative¹⁰⁹. A Prevent employee who wished to remain anonymous gave the following description of how Prevent and counter-terrorism policies are weaponised:

“Prevent and it’s perceived targeting of Muslims has now been instrumentalised by Islamists and far left allies as evidence of their broader narrative which claims that the British state is engaged in a covert propaganda war against Islam. This not only effects the ability of Prevent to be impactful, but also gives fodder to dangerous ideologues.”¹¹⁰

Similarly, terror attacks and counter-terrorism responses have provided a flashpoint for extremists. At a rally outside Her Majesty’s Prison Belmarsh, Imam Shakeel Begg of Lewisham Islamic Centre praised the “Muslim prisoners” and “expressed unqualified support for their deeds” (which included serious crimes and terror offences). According to the judiciary, Shakeel praised them for “speaking truth to power”, and went on to endorse militant Islamists like Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam¹¹¹.

On another occasion, Begg protested the arrest of a terror suspect, claiming that he was only on a “paint-ball trip” and was baselessly accused of preparing for terrorism – the individual in question went on to be convicted for terrorism offences¹¹². In the same speech, Begg claims that new terrorism legislation is designed specifically to target Muslims, claiming: “That legislation is terrorism towards the Muslim community¹¹³”. Begg also accused a Muslim scholar of ‘signing a deal with the devil’ for giving a speech to UK counter-terrorism police¹¹⁴.

106: Robert Verkaik, “British Muslims on safari ‘stopped by MI5’”, The Independent, May 1 2010 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/british-muslims-on-safari-stopped-by-mi5-1959610.html>

107: “‘Jihadi John’: Extremists ‘not radicalised by MI5’”, BBC News, Feb 27 2015 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31663988>

108: The Cage homepage reads: “Empowering communities impacted by the war on terror; prevent, schedule 7, Guantánamo Bay, rendition, torture, drones etc” <https://www.cage.ngo/>

109: Dr. Paul Stott, “The demise of critical thinking: how Islamist organizations corrupt the academy”, Academia, (no date given) https://www.academia.edu/30916557/The_demise_of_critical_thinking_how_Islamist_organizations_corrupt_the_academy

110: Author interview with Prevent employee, May 11 2020

111: Begg vs. BBC [2016]

112: “Shakeel Begg denigrating the police”, Habibi Youtube Channel, Oct 30 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr3Bf8qVWjc> and “Top Extremist Recruiter is Jailed”, BBC News, Feb 26 2008 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7256859.stm>

113: Ibid

114: Begg vs. BBC [2016]

This linking of domestic developments to international events is how disparate and unrelated phenomena are knitted together in an overall narrative of persecution and oppression of Muslims as well as hostility towards Islam. To give just one example, one prominent commentator and editor of the 5Pillarz website took to Twitter to connect the controversy surrounding the teaching of LGBT+ awareness lessons in Birmingham schools to a worldwide pattern of hostility, including the Israel/Palestine conflict. Regarding the Birmingham schools protests he wrote:

“Muslims are not just under attack on a political level (Palestine, foreign policy etc), we are under attack at a religious level as well in terms of our normative beliefs. If Muslims fail to stand up for our core beliefs there will be no Islam left for our children.”¹¹⁵

Similarly, the extremist milieu in Southern France from which the eventual 2016 Bastille Day truck attacker would emerge produced a series of popularly shared films linking the plight of Muslims in France to state policies, antisemitic conspiracy theories, and according to Gilles Kepel, suggested a “perfect congruence between the fate of French Muslims and that of Palestinians.”¹¹⁶

As this demonstrates, the narrative of “host” countries’ hostility to Islam is not unique to Britain, and is at times amplified and exacerbated by the Salafi-Jihadi groups. Recent debates surrounding the headscarf and the niqab in secular France have provided a flashpoint to animate domestic Islamist groups, but even Al-Qaeda figureheads Osama Bin Laden and Aymen Al-Zawahiri have weighed into the debate. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s glossy English language Inspire magazine used the debate¹¹⁷ as evidence of France’s “tremendous revulsion for Islam itself”¹¹⁸.

“Muslims of the West, take heed and learn from the lessons of history: There are ominous clouds gathering in your horizon. Yesterday, America was a land of slavery, segregation, lynching, and [the] Ku Klux Klan, and tomorrow it will be a land of religious discrimination and concentration camps ... the war between Muslims and the West is escalating.”- *Awlaki*¹¹⁹

In the UK, several organisations have also compared the situation facing Muslims in the West as comparable to the experience of Jews in 1930s Germany, clearly a very serious charge¹²⁰.

There are very serious problems facing Muslims in Britain and many Western countries, many will have faced racism and bigotry in their day to day lives, and there is growing concern over media coverage pertaining to Muslims. Nevertheless, there is a clear narrative pattern propagated that Western countries are hostile environments for Muslims by design, upheld through the complicity of institutions like the media and law enforcement. As recently as the terror attacks in London in December 2019 and February 2020, viral WhatsApp messages circulated from UK-based preachers planting seeds of doubt about the perpetrators’ motivations, and accusing the police of ‘summarily executing’ Muslims¹²¹.

It is widely recognised that anger, alienation and marginalisation can play a role in violent radicalisation, but the role that some groups play in deliberately fostering the sense of marginalisation is less understood and confronted. Former Prime Minister David Cameron stressed the importance of countering these narratives in a 2015 speech on extremism:

“The world is not conspiring against Islam; the security services aren’t behind terrorist attacks; our new Prevent duty for schools is not about criminalising or spying on Muslim children. This is paranoia in the extreme.”¹²²
- *Former Prime Minister David Cameron*

115: Roshan Salih, Twitter post.

116: Gilles Kepel, *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West*, p. 87

117: Laurence Bindner, “Jihadists’ Grievance Narratives against France,” ICCT Policy Brief, February 2018. P.6 <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Bindner-Jihadists-Grievance-Narratives-Against-France-February2018.pdf>

118: Inspire magazine issue 1 (AQAP, July 2010), 7

119: Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “As American as Apple Pie.” p.76

120: A number of these assertions are detailed in the following report: Trevor Phillips, Sir John Jenkins and Dr Martyn Frampton, “On Islamophobia: The problem of definition”, Policy Exchange, May 2019 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/On-Islamophobia.pdf>

121: WhatsApp messages sent to author thought to have originated from UK based preachers, February 2020.

122: David Cameron, “Extremism: PM speech”, HM Government, July 20 2015 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/extremism-pm-speech>

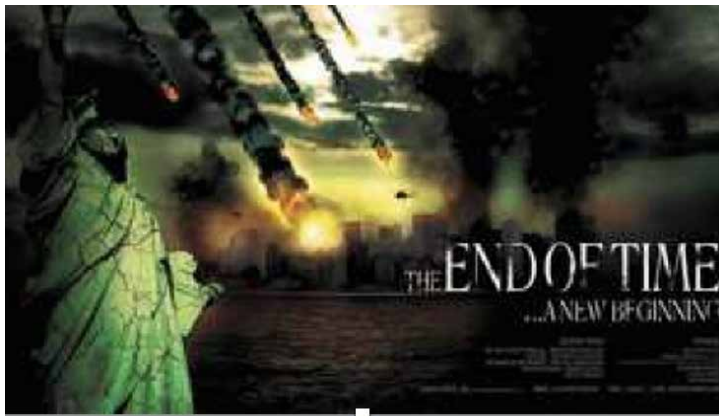
Case Study: Anwar Al-Awlaki's Reach in Britain

Anwar Al-Awlaki was instrumental in spreading and intensifying the appeal of Salafi-Jihadist ideology in the West, his track record and the following he built up before fully committing to Al-Qaeda gave him unique penetration into communities around the world. In particular, Awlaki was adept at propagating the narrative of an immediate threat to Muslims living in the West. In this, Awlaki's profile and reach was considerably heightened by the activities of revivalist groups in Britain to promote him. Years after his death, Awlaki's appeal continues to be linked to inspiring and inciting terrorists in Britain and beyond.

Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, one of the leading experts on Awlaki's impact in the West explained Awlaki's key role:



“Without Awlaki, it is unlikely that Salafi-Jihadism would have gained this sort of traction in the West. First and foremost, he helped to convey a stark sense of Muslim victimhood – a notion from which the ideology draws much of its succor – among Western, English speaking Muslims. He presented them with an image of a ‘War on Islam’ in terms that made it more relevant to their lives, framing disparate events involving Muslims as part of a wider conspiracy. No longer would this Western secular plot to destroy Islam and oppress Muslims be presented only in terms of foreign wars and occupations in distant lands. It was, according to Awlaki, a much more immediate threat, taking place right under their noses. If they did not act soon, he warned his followers, they too would eventually fall victims.”¹²³



Awlaki's influence has been connected to an array of terrorists and plots originating in Britain, from the “underwear bomber” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to the 2019 London Bridge attacker Usman Khan more recently. Less recognised and understood, is the extent to which institutions and civil society groups helped to mainstream his message and influence in the United Kingdom.

This even included his lectures being

streamed into events at the London Muslim Centre (LMC - connected to East London Mosque), after he had left the United States for Yemen and evidence of his extremist activities were public.

The poster (pictured above) for the 2009 event held at the London Muslim Centre at East London Mosque at which Awlaki spoke drew significant backlash for its depiction of New York City in flames¹²⁴. Given prior accusations that some of the 9/11 attackers had attended Awlaki's mosques in California and Virginia, this poster was considered particularly inflammatory.

Even years earlier, in 2003, Awlaki was giving lectures and sermons in person in the UK, at which he implied that Muslims should not cooperate with law enforcement and counter-terrorism investigations and as late as 2008, a MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development) official posted a blog on the Islamic Forum of Europe's website praising Awlaki¹²⁵. A hyperlink within the blog took users directly to Awlaki's blog, in which he specifically encouraged followers to “strive through Jihad” to restore an “Islamic Khilafah” (Caliphate).¹²⁶

123: Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *Incitement: Anwar Al-Awlaki's Western Jihad*, Harvard University Press, 2020 p.3

124: Source: “Councillor slams Muslim lecture New York in flames’ poster”, East London Advertiser, Dec 31 2008 <https://www.eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk/news/councillor-slams-muslim-lecture-new-york-in-flames-poster-1-667219>

125: Imam Sheikh Dr Usama Hasan, David Toube, Muna Khan, “Mainstreaming Islamism.” pp.24-25

126: Ibid. pp.24-25

As late as 2009, Awlaki was due to speak (via videolink) at University Islamic Society (ISOC) events, such as at City University. The local council at the time cancelled the event, but the ISOC posted his speech and materials online in an act of defiance¹²⁷. Given that a number of UK student ISOCs regularly hosted Islamist preachers, including Awlaki during the 2000s, it is perhaps no coincidence that a number of Jihadist terrorists have emerged from British university campuses.

Many of the organisations, from student groups to charities and religious institutions, which platformed Awlaki during the 2000s have defended their decisions on the basis that his extreme views and connections to terrorists did not emerge until later. However, even during the early 2000s his statements, lectures and sermons explicitly pushed a narrative of victimhood and oppression, and platforming these views was a conscious decision. Later in his life, increasing speculation and evidence of his links to violent extremists emerged, with United States government figures clearly highlighting his links to the global Jihad¹²⁸.

There is no evidence the organisations which platformed Awlaki supported his violent Jihad, but there was sufficient overlap in narrative for Awlaki to be considered an appropriate speaker and lecturer on numerous occasions, despite evidence of his links to terrorism. Many thousands of people will have been introduced to these divisive narratives and to Awlaki himself during this period, and some of whom (such as Usman Khan), have gone on to commit attacks themselves¹²⁹.



Countering Islamist Narratives

Having considered four key narrative themes which are deployed by both violent and non-violent Islamist groups in Britain and the West, this section will explore the potential for countering those narratives, both through explicit communications campaigns and on the ground community projects. Thus, some of the projects and programmes discussed here may not traditionally be thought of as ‘counter-narratives’, but their role in potentially countering the four narrative themes will be explored.

Unfortunately, in recent years many of the efforts to counter Al-Qaeda and Islamic State messaging have sought to focus primarily on deconstructing the propaganda that has spread online, rather than interrogating the resonance of the narratives conveyed by the propaganda. Given that, as previous sections have shown, non-violent organisations are propagating many of the same beliefs and narratives on the local level without the calls to violence, both the physical and online recruitment narratives of violent extremist organisations are amplified considerably. As is shown by the case of Anwar Al-Awlaki, non-violent groups have even provided the platform for people to be introduced to a Jihadist recruiter, rather than simply the narrative.

In other respects, theological interventions have challenged the religious legitimacy of Islamist and Jihadist terrorism, this has often come in the form of religious leaders denouncing attacks or in using theological mentors in one-on-one interventions with radicalising or radicalised individuals. These efforts are of the utmost importance given Jihadist claims to religious legitimacy and should continue.

Focusing on countering the political dimensions of the narratives, such as the competing visions for ordering society and the narratives of oppression and persecution, is key.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) developed a ‘counter-messaging spectrum’ which can help to place and contextualise counter-narrative campaigns and projects to the narratives discussed in this paper.

128: Gordon Rayner, “Muslim groups ‘linked to September 11 hijackers spark fury over conference’,” The Telegraph, Dec 27 2008, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/3966501/Muslim-groups-linked-to-September-11-hijackers-spark-fury-over-conference.html>

129: Mark Bridge, Fariha Karim, Olivia Bizot, “YouTube still hosting lectures by Islamist hate preacher Anwar Al-Awlaki,” The Times, Dec 5 2019 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/youtube-still-hosting-lectures-by-Islamist-hate-preacher-anwar-al-awlaki-ng52tmm28>

Counter-Messaging Spectrum			
What	Why	How	Who
Government Strategic Communications (stratcom)	Action to get the message about what government is doing, including public awareness activities	Raise awareness, forge relationships with key constituencies and audiences and correct misinformation	Government
Alternative Narratives	Undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are “for” rather than “against”	Positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy	Civil society and government
Counter-Narratives	Directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging	Challenge through ideology, logic, fact or humour	Civil society ¹³⁰

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Organisations like Hedayah Center of Excellence for CVE and the European Union’s Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) have created resources to help organisations and practitioners with limited resources to ensure their projects and programmes are appropriately directed. The most important step in all of these instances is to conduct extensive research into the problem before starting a program. Some years ago, a parliamentary committee concluded that money had “been wasted on unfocused and irrelevant projects”, a common concern raised in Prevent and CVE programming¹³¹.

In this context, it is essential that programs and projects are directly challenging the problem. The benefit of projects which tackle the narratives outlined in this paper (if applicable to the local context), is the opportunity to push back against narratives and anti-democratic beliefs which are held by multiple groups across the Islamist spectrum, from violent to non-violent.

Key Recommendation

Practitioners should conduct extensive research into local dynamics, narratives, key institutions and recruitment patterns prior to establishing programming.

This will ensure that programming is focussed and relevant. Practitioners may wish to make use of resources created by Hedayah Cve and the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network which provide guidance on establishing new programs and counter-narratives.

Recommendation

New projects should have a clearly expressed theory of change detailing how they will counter extremist narratives.

130: Table adapted from: Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, “Policy Briefing : Countering The Appeal of Extremism Online,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014 p.13 <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Countering%20the%20Appeal%20of%20Extremism%20Online-ISD%20Report.pdf>

Identity & Grievance

As both Lorenzo Vidino and Dina Al-Raffie have emphasised, Islamist narratives thrive on identity politics and the politicisation of identity. The challenge for Prevent and the CVE sector is that, in some ways, elements of what can be termed ‘identity politics’ have entered the mainstream. Identity politics may exacerbate real or perceived differences and tensions between ethnic and social identity groups, as well as a sense of grievance or victimhood – these are cornerstones of Islamist strategy and thus CVE projects should emphasise shared values and interests to the greatest extent possible, rather than difference.

As Islamist groups seek to foster the sense of identity, they simultaneously “exploit global crises, undeniable forms of discrimination and cultural tensions” to create a ‘siege mentality’ of being discriminated against and victimised among the communities they claim to represent, creating a strong sense of attachment and in/out group identity¹³².

This Islamist strategy does not just involve creating mental barriers between citizens. Senior Islamist leader Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, who is barred from entry into the United Kingdom, has explicitly argued for a strategy of deliberately ghettoising European Muslim communities, physically and culturally/religiously, but while still participating in political processes which are beneficial to the movement’s ultimate objectives¹³³.

Unfortunately, at times, well-intentioned efforts in Prevent, CVE and counter-extremism may have inadvertently contributed to the feeling of victimisation which can exacerbate the very sentiment Islamist groups are attempting to foster. A London Times editorial emphasised how focussing on feelings of victimisation could actually be counter-productive:

“In some projects targeted at young Muslims, the staff were more at ease chairing a conversation about participants’ experiences of anti-Islamic prejudice. This did not pay dividends. Those taking part ended the sessions with less support for essential democratic values, such as freedom of speech, than when they went in.”¹³⁴

Beyond Islamism, left-wing writers such as Kenan Malik have also warned that exacerbating division and feelings of grievance among minority communities may inadvertently empower and legitimise the far-right as well, as groups appear within white majorities which adopt the same tribalism and defensiveness¹³⁵.

American writer Amy Chua argued in the Guardian that various social and ethnic groups are coming to see themselves as increasingly under siege, and that the effects can be dangerous for democracy:

“When groups feel threatened, they retreat into tribalism. When groups feel mistreated and disrespected, they close ranks and become more insular, more defensive, more punitive, more us-versus-them.”¹³⁶

131: “Preventing Violent Extremism,” House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2009–10, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcomloc/65/65.pdf> p. 61.

132: Lorenzo Vidino, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West*

133: Ibid. pp.73-75

134: “Averting Disaster: The government’s deradicalisation strategy is failing”, *The Times*, June 6 2018 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/averting-disaster-d7sdp8l77>

135: Kenan Malik, “Beware the politics of identity. They help legitimise the toxic far right”, *The Guardian*, Feb 23 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/23/beware-politics-of-identity-they-help-legitimise-toxic-far-right>

136: Amy Chua, “How America’s identity politics went from inclusion to division”, *The Guardian*, Mar 1 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/mar/01/how-americas-identity-politics-went-from-inclusion-to-division>



Chua argues that many initiatives and trends which began as ‘inclusion’ have strayed into “identity politics”. Like Malik, Chua includes the white majority in this equation, as identity politics helps to create a “white identity” (on which the far-right might thrive).

Indeed, research has suggested that members of “populist” groups and “identity politics” groups are driven by the same senses of belonging, meaning and recognition – and crucially, groups felt that their political ‘gains’ were under threat from an ‘other’ that they perceived to be more powerful¹³⁷. Populist politics has been the subject of a good deal of attention in CVE, CE and Prevent circles, yet identity based politics, which is just as tribal and defensive, has not received the same attention.

Of course, it is entirely appropriate that individuals feel proud of their community’s cultural and religious heritage, and the role of CVE programming should not be to interfere with or undermine this sentiment whatsoever, but it should also avoid intensifying or exasperating the formation of a grievance-based identity in which identity is held in opposition to other groups.

Recommendation

Program designers should take care to ensure that initiatives designed to encourage inclusion and belonging do not exacerbate feelings of difference, division and grievance or rivalry towards other groups.

137: Katie McQuater, “Is Identity Politics Eroding Social Cohesion?”, ResearchLive, March 11 2020 <https://www.research-live.com/article/news/is-identity-politics-eroding-social-cohesion/id/5066382>

Applying 'Do No Harm' in Domestic Settings

The 'Do No Harm' (DNH) principle is a cornerstone of effective humanitarian and conflict zone programming. The Belgian strategy for humanitarian aid developed in 2014 defined DNH as: "the principle that requires humanitarian actors to endeavour not to cause further damage and suffering as a result of their actions¹³⁸."

Just as the humanitarian sector is aware that aid is not neutral, CVE actors should be aware that CVE programming is not neutral, and may have many unintended second and third order effects. Although CVE programming overseas has often taken DNH into account, the concept is not well understood in domestic CVE and terrorism prevention in Western contexts.

In some instances, extra funding for CVE and Prevent programming to be delivered by Muslim community groups 'on the ground' in a local area has caused aggrievement among other minority communities that feel cut off from a potentially important source of funding, because they are not perceived to be a 'vulnerable group' and therefore a target audience of Prevent/CVE programming¹³⁹. This shows that, far from being only applicable to humanitarian and conflict settings, potentially unforeseen and negative consequences do exist in the delivery of domestic CVE.

More specifically related to program design, conducting extensive research into local extremist activity and ensuring that program design accounts extensively for DNH may avoid creating the sense of grievance and victimhood among participants which can actually contribute to societal division and individual radicalisation.

Recommendation

Greater training and guidance available to practitioners on program design, research, monitoring and evaluation and the "do no harm" principle in domestic programming.

Recommendation

All new projects and programs should have a clear and explicit theory of change with regards to a countering extremism/radicalisation outcome.

Competing with Islamism

As this paper demonstrates, there are many more sophisticated and coherent political narratives to Islamist and Jihadist ideology than much of the current discourse suggests, and this is not to mention the theological claims and justifications. It is crucial for those invested in countering Islamist ideology to understand that the promise of an Islamic state or caliphate is a competing vision for ordering society. Efforts might therefore be made to promote and defend democratic values more vociferously.

Endeavours have been made in this regard, as seen by the British government's requirement for schools to promote 'Fundamental British Values' (Democracy, the Rule of Law, Individual Liberty and Mutual Respect and Tolerance for Different Faiths and Beliefs)¹⁴⁰. However, putting aside the controversy and opposition surrounding the terminology, guidance on how and what this means in practice is limited. It is also questionable the extent to which a nation's fundamental values can be simplified or constricted within a short document or set of bullet points.

This paper advances the dual premise that the ideal of an Islamic state is both a system of governance which Islamists encourage followers to strive (sometimes violently) to achieve, and that such a radical and rebellious vision provides individuals with a sense of purpose which can make Islamism more attractive than life in liberal democracy.

138: "Incorporating the principle of "Do No Harm": How to take action without causing harm", FHE, 2018. p.6 https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/donoharm_pe07_synthesis.pdf

139: Author correspondence with local Prevent practitioner (anonymised), May 13 2020

140: "Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools", HM Government, Nov 2014 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380595/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama predicted how future generations might rebel against the status quo from a need to struggle for a just cause in his seminal work, *The End of History and the Last Man*:

“Experience suggests that if men cannot struggle on behalf of a just cause because that just cause was victorious in an earlier generation, then they will struggle against the just cause. They will struggle for the sake of struggle. They will struggle, in other words, out of a certain boredom: for they cannot imagine living in a world without struggle. And if the greater part of the world in which they live is characterized by peaceful and prosperous liberal democracy, then they will struggle against that peace and prosperity, and against democracy.”¹⁴¹

– *Francis Fukuyama*

A number of renowned scholars and commentators have entertained the possibility that Westerners are taking democracy and its inherent rights for granted. Given that there are competing systems which have been successful in attracting large numbers of Westerners to their causes, including the establishment of an Islamic state, it is apparent that we can no longer afford to be so complacent.

Far from being a natural state of affairs or a ‘universal’ value, liberal democracy is a system which has been fought for over centuries, and which needs defending, both philosophically and at times physically. General prevention efforts aimed at the broader population rather than ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk’ communities can be instrumental in promoting a greater understanding and appreciation of democracy’s historical development and uniqueness in the world today. Indeed, as Freedom House monitoring suggests, democracy and freedom are in decline around the world in recent years, and fully democratic states remain a minority¹⁴².

Individuals who have direct experience of living under alternative systems of governance may be powerful messengers. The Afghanistan and Central Asian Association (ACAA) based in West London is led by Dr. Nooralhaq Nasimi, who fled the Taliban’s Afghanistan with his family prior to the US-led invasion in 2001. Several members of the family are engaged in various arms of the organisation and social media activity shows a strong and unusually outspoken appreciation for both British society and democratic values¹⁴³.

Harnessing the first-hand experiences of individuals like those at ACAA, who have lived under the kind of theocratic conditions which Islamist groups would seek to implement, could serve as a powerful counter-narrative. The ACAA are also clear that there is no contradiction between their faith and fully embracing British society and democratic processes, itself an important counter-weight to divisive Islamist narratives.

Possible Counter-narrative Example

Give children and young people the opportunity to hear directly from individuals who have lived under undemocratic regimes.

Above all, there is an opportunity to reemphasise the more revolutionary and dynamic elements of liberal democracy, a system which has been centuries in the making and the protection of which has cost hundreds of thousands of lives if not more. Rediscovering greater confidence in the merits and value of liberal democracy among practitioners and policymakers could translate to grassroots projects. Children and young people may be looking for exciting and revolutionary ideas to latch on to, and there are few more exciting and revolutionary ideas than freedom and democracy.

141: “Incorporating the principle of “Do No Harm”: How to take action without causing harm”, FHE, 2018, p.6 https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/donoharm_pe07_synthesis.pdf

142: Author correspondence with local Prevent practitioner (anonymised), May 13 2020

143: ACAA Twitter account https://twitter.com/A_CAA

Case Studies: Confronting the Political

Case Study: Faith on the Frontline

The 'Faith on the Frontline' project was a hybrid initiative which saw Imam Asim Hafiz, a religious advisor to the Ministry of Defence, filmed for a documentary about his deployment to Afghanistan to support both British Muslim troops and local outreach efforts. A trailer for the documentary can be found on YouTube¹⁴⁴.

The project involved a screening of segments of the documentary in addition to in person talks in various settings, including schools and sixth form colleges, with Imam Asim Hafiz.

The project's premise is promising as it could serve to undermine and delegitimise simplistic narratives about the war in Afghanistan, about British foreign policy more broadly, and about the place of Muslims in the West and in serving in the Armed Forces.

After Major Nidal Hasan's attack at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009, Anwar Al-Awlaki (whom Hasan had been in contact with prior to the attack) exploited the incident to further his narrative that Hasan could not bear to serve in a military which oppresses Muslims around the world¹⁴⁵. As discussed earlier in this report, various non-violent Islamists have also advised against cooperation with authorities in Western countries, not least joining the military. This project demonstrates that Imam Asim Hafiz and various Muslim soldiers see no inherent contradiction in retaining their faith and serving their country – an important and positive message to counter the division of Islamist narratives.



Case Study: Average Mohamed

The Average Mohamed project is the brainchild of Somali-American, Mohamed Ahmed, and was born in response to the influence of non-violent Islamism in his local communities and Jihadist recruitment of young people from Minneapolis-St.Paul, a city which has experienced high levels of radicalisation and recruitment to the Jihadist cause relative to other North American cities. There are also a number of non-violent Islamist groups influential in the area¹⁴⁶.



Mohamed Ahmed's Average Mohamed project runs a series of cartoon animations aimed at children and young people exploring issues relating to faith, identity and extremism. Ahmed himself is both a practicing Muslim and an outspoken and proud American citizen, frequently expressing support for American servicemen and woman and authorities – on its own this is a crucial counterweight to the "us & them" narratives detailed in this guidance¹⁴⁷.

The Average Mohamed project combines online animations with in-person engagement on a range of issues relating to identity, democracy and faith.

In the screenshot (above), the emphasis is on the identity issues which some young Muslims in the West may be facing and which are deliberately exploited by extremist groups¹⁴⁸.

144: "Faith on the Frontline", Armed Forces Muslim Association YouTube, Sept 4 2015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cY54c2_1Ttw

145: Adam Rawnsley, "Radical Imam Blogs His Support of Ft. Hood Shooter (Updated)", Wired, Nov 9 2009 <https://www.wired.com/2009/11/radical-imam-blogs-his-support-of-ft-hood-shooter/>

146: Mohamed Ahmed has previously told this author how he has been targeted and heavily criticised for his work by non-violent Islamist groups in Minneapolis-St.Paul. See: Liam Duffy, "The No True Muslim Fallacy", Civitas, October 2019

147: Based on social media activity across LinkedIn and Twitter.

148: "A Muslim in the West", Average Mohamed YouTube, Oct 5 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umY5GezsOQ4>

Case Study: Drive for Democracy (Sweden)

In Sweden, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) runs 'Swedish Foreign Policy Stories', billed as "Stories about Sweden and our Foreign Policy". The government uses this program to communicate the goals and priorities of Swedish foreign policy to larger audiences using both online and in-person events and talks.

Within this programme the MFA runs 'Drive for Democracy', explained in the following terms:

"Sweden stands up, in all contexts, for the fundamental principles of democracy. These include citizen participation, human rights, representative government, separation of powers, a functioning rule of law system, free media and independent institutions. Democracy around the world is unfortunately in decline. More people currently live in countries with authoritarian tendencies than in countries making democratic progress. Democratic processes are being undermined. The rule of law is being scorned. Sweden wants to be a leading global force that stands up for the advancement of democracy."¹⁴⁹

Among various other initiatives both within Sweden and around the world, the Drive for Democracy organises 'Democracy Talks' which aim to: "provide support to the institutions, processes and defenders of democracy, while also responding to the growing threats and challenges facing democracy today¹⁵⁰."

The Democracy Talks project represents a more explicit and outspoken defence of democratic values and attempt to highlight the benefits of liberal democracy and the rule of law. Unfortunately, as the project is so new, evaluation data is not yet available on the success of the project, but it is nonetheless a more direct and unique effort to counter the appeal of undemocratic systems and present democracy as a moral system.



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149: Ibid

150: "Drive for Democracy takes shape", Government Offices of Sweden, Nov 27th 2019 <https://www.government.se/articles/2019/11/drive-for-democracy-takes-shape/>

CONCLUSION

This guidance has made the case for a refocus of P/CVE efforts, both communications campaigns and community projects, on the political elements of Islamist ideology and narratives. There are a number of potential benefits from this. For example, by emphasising that Islamism is a political ideology and making a clear distinction between Islamist ideology and Islamic belief, the likelihood that more conservative Islamic practices are conflated with extremism by government, practitioners and the wider public may be reduced.

Making the mistake that there is a continuum between conservative Islamic belief and extremist ideology has led some CVE projects to examine LGBT or women's empowerment issues in Muslim communities, yet there is no evidence that conservative attitudes on these issues is tantamount to violent extremism. Islamist extremists hold regressive attitudes towards women and LGBT people, but they are not cornerstones of the worldview. When protests broke out against LGBT teaching in Birmingham schools, Islamists exploited this as evidence that Islamic norms were under attack, as they have done with many other issues¹⁵².

Refocusing on the political element may also allow practitioners, policymakers and civil society leaders to feel more comfortable in discussing and confronting Islamist ideology. Advocating for an alternative state system, for more favourable foreign and domestic policies and intellectual rejection of Western thought are inherently political positions, although underpinned by theological claims.

As we have seen, many Jihadist groups and individual terrorists have propagated similar narratives to domestic revivalist and non-violent Islamist groups – these narratives are divisive from a social cohesion standpoint and run the risk of inadvertently increasing radicalisation and/or introducing individuals to Jihadist thought (as we have seen by the platforming of Anwar Al-Awlaki in Britain).

More focus on tackling these narratives carries the potential of greater reward, rather than projects which are either completely depoliticised, or those which overly focus on religious or cultural issues.

A dramatic night scene featuring a large fire with bright orange and yellow flames. A firefighter, visible in the lower right corner, is spraying a powerful stream of water onto the fire. The background is dark, and the scene is filled with the intense light of the fire and the mist from the water spray.

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