OVERVIEW

Concerns about Islamist extremism are growing both in the West and in Muslim-majority countries as it continues to kill tens of thousands each year around the globe. Yet there is a deficiency in evidence-based research into how the supremacist ideology that drives this violence warps mainstream religious principles.

There must be greater consensus among policymakers and thought leaders that the battle against the extremism of groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda is not against Islam, but against a perversion of the religion. This report aims to clarify the nature of that perversion, to enable a religiously grounded response to Islamist extremism, in both its violent and its nonviolent forms.

In 2016–2017, debates reached fever pitch around elections in Europe and across the Atlantic. A growing climate of intolerance spurred the conflation of extremist violence with issues such as national identity, refugee flows, and women’s rights, with populist politicians using the threat of jihadism to justify an assault on the religious mainstream. While the mainstream is vocal, extremists—both Islamist and anti-Muslim—are often the voices that dominate the debate about the relationship between Islam and violence.

In such a climate, many do not draw the important ideological distinctions between a faith of 1.8 billion and a militant fringe, causing Muslims at large to be blamed for the activities of an extremist minority. ISIS talks of eradicating the grey zone of peaceful co-existence. Yet Muslims are the most numerous victims of Islamist violence globally, accounting for 90 per cent of all terrorism fatalities, according to the US National Counterterrorism Center.

Our findings reveal the distinct positions of different interpretations of Islam and where there is ideological and conceptual overlap. Overall, Islamist extremism is at odds with classical interpretations of Islam and overrepresents contentious religious concepts over central Islamic principles.

While there is notable distance between Salafi-jihadi ideology and mainstream Islam, Islamism is considerably more ideologically aligned with Salafi-jihadism than with the mainstream, despite attempts by nonviolent Islamists to present themselves as part of the religious mainstream.

Analysis of references to the Quran shows that extremists quote scripture extensively but selectively, and that counter-narratives are failing to effectively confront this skewed approach to scripture. Such insights have implications for policymakers’ efforts to build resilience against the ideas underpinning a global movement.

Further research should focus on building a nuanced picture of how extremist views can catalyse...
and legitimise violence. Only by understanding the nature of this perversion of religion can leaders hope to tackle the warped worldview behind the bloodshed.

**KEY FINDINGS**

**Salafi-jihadi ideology is demonstrably distant from mainstream Islam.** There is a clear divergence from the mainstream in extremists’ use of scripture and religious concepts. Only 8 per cent of the 50 most quoted Quranic verses in Salafi-jihadi material were prevalent in mainstream texts. And while 86 per cent of Salafi-jihadis’ main conceptual references were extreme in their interpretation, 7 per cent of mainstream key themes had the potential to be interpreted through a violent lens.

**Islamism is more ideologically aligned with Salafi-jihadism than with the mainstream.** Despite attempts by nonviolent Islamists to present themselves as part of the religious mainstream, there is a greater similarity between Islamists and violent extremists in how they use scripture, scholarship, and religious concepts in texts. Over half of the top Quranic verses quoted by Salafi-jihadis are in common with those cited by Islamists, while there is very little overlap between Islamists and the mainstream.

**Counter-narratives are failing to contest in the right theological places.** Counter-narratives should be taking on the key arguments peddled by extremists. But few of the central scriptural references used by Salafi-jihadis to justify their actions are substantively addressed in the counter-narrative content analysed. Almost half of the key ideological concepts of Salafi-jihadism are not prominently tackled in counter-narratives. Approaches to counter-messages largely fail to balance rebutting the false claims of extremists with providing compelling alternatives that reclaim religious discourse from Islamist and jihadi ideologues.

**Islamist extremism is at odds with classical interpretations of Islam.** Islamist extremists claim to be restoring a glorious Islamic past, but their rhetoric is at odds with classical, premodern theological traditions of Islam. Salafi-jihadi texts have more in common with modern Quranic commentaries than with classical ones. Modern figures feature far more prominently in extremist literature than historical Islamic figures do. This is problematic for extremists who claim Salafi-jihadism is the historically rooted true face of Islam.

**Extremists quote scripture extensively, but selectively.** The Quran is quoted five times more often by Salafi-jihadis than in mainstream material, showing extremists’ determination to root their ideology in religious garb. But their approach is characterised by cherry-picking that focuses on a small cluster of verses to affirm their ideological position. The fact that extremists employ religious texts selectively to make their arguments can be used to undermine their claims of religious legitimacy.

**Islamist extremism buries the significance of central Islamic practices.** The religious concepts prominent in extremist and mainstream texts are poles apart. While ‘fasting,’ ‘prayers,’ and ‘preaching’ are among the five most referenced concepts in mainstream content, they fail to appear in the top 30 ideas in Salafi-jihadi literature. Meanwhile, the concepts of ‘mujahideen’ and ‘Islamic state,’ the second and third most referenced ideas in Salafi-jihadi texts (the first being ‘jihad’), do not appear in the top 50 mainstream results, reflecting the contrasting priorities placed on Islamic thought and practice.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Assert the distinctions between Islamist extremism and mainstream Islam in the political debate.** Debates about extremism are increasingly dominated by the political fringes and often isolate members of religious communities best placed to rebut such narratives. A fundamental reappraisal is required to reignite a progressive conversation about Islamist violence, centred on an evidence-based distinction between extremism and the religious mainstream.

Policymakers should:

- Be confident about the understanding and arguments to distinguish between extremist and mainstream religious interpretations. This will empower them to define and call out destructive ideologies, helping form public consensus about their societal unacceptability.
- Robustly affirm universal values such as pluralism, the rule of law, religious freedom, and gender equality that are under attack from extremists. This will demonstrate that the battle against extremist ideas is not against mainstream religious belief and its practice.
Journalists and opinion formers should:

- Ensure reporting on extremism demonstrates religious literacy. Commentators have made great steps in reporting responsibly, particularly since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005. Media outlets need a nuanced understanding of the ideological and conceptual differences between extremist and mainstream interpretations. Experts can educate generalists to differentiate between the two.

- Look beyond those who shout the loudest and involve a representative range of perspectives. This will help prevent extremist individuals from incorrectly claiming to speak for the majority view. While Islamist voices often present themselves as representatives of the mainstream, our research shows the clear ideological distinction between such interpretations.

Facilitate active participation of religious leaders in efforts to counter extremism.

Governments have an important part to play in communicating moderate and mainstream messages, but their main role must be to create space and support for diverse civil-society responses to extremism.

It is crucial that credible religious voices are engaged effectively to undermine the claims of extremists. By working with community actors to refute extremist interpretations of Islamic scripture, governments should distance themselves from accusations that they are cultivating a state-sanctioned Islam.

Counter-extremism policymakers should:

- Identify credible gatekeepers and influencers from Muslim communities to bring together a broad variety of individuals to reflect the mainstream. Often figures purport to represent religious communities but in fact serve as advocates for politicised non-mainstream positions.

- Empower credible Muslim voices to speak up and rebut distortions of their faith. Building strategic communications expertise on understanding audiences, effectively engaging the media, and presenting powerful religious arguments will amplify the many community voices that convey an interpretation of Islam rooted in mainstream religious principles.

- Coordinate international counter-extremism work to ensure that the impact of efforts is maximised and that a global response mirrors a global challenge. Our sample of counter-narratives shows that much is being done at a national level, but there is currently limited sharing across countries of best practices or lessons learned from successful efforts.

Challenge extremist use of scripture. Counter-narratives are tailored towards attacking a specific worldview, with the great majority of narratives explicitly taking aim at Salafi-jihadi ideology. Efforts should take on the key arguments peddled by extremists but are currently failing to contest in the right theological places. Rather than tackling Salafi-jihadi violence, counter-narratives should aim to defeat the Islamist ideology that legitimises violence.

Religious leaders should develop counter-narratives that:

- Offer a balanced combination of approaches to reclaim religious discourse from the extreme ideologues, by demonstrating the aberration of extremists, taking on their claims, and offering coherent alternatives.

- Confront directly the parts of scripture most cited by extremists and unpack the concepts they most focus on, to offer alternative interpretations. This will help prevent extremists from defining the rules of the game in the battle of ideas.

- Undermine extremists’ claims by revealing the selective and narrow references to scripture they use to affirm their ideological positions.

Improve accessibility of mainstream Islamic content. The online space is one of the most important fronts in the battle against extremism. Content must be delivered and presented in the right spaces to challenge extremism on the Internet. Online data collection for this report found Salafi-jihadi and Islamist interpretations to be readily available, and this needs to change.

Governments should:

- Fund and support the establishment of a centralised online resource in which credible religious voices can issue authoritative and
compelling correctives to extremist ideologies. Such a platform would provide accessible mainstream interpretations of a range of contentious concepts, ranging from sharia to tawhid, serving as a resource for both counter-extremism practitioners and individuals who seek religious opinions.

- Provide research and expertise to tailor such a resource to fit local contexts, including by understanding the specific community-level narratives that extremists use to peddle their ideology. An overarching ideology links extremist groups and movements, but different manifestations exploit specific local conditions.
- Recognise the broader importance of correcting perversions of religion to dispel dangerous notions such as the belief that violent jihad is a fundamental Islamic duty, which the far right uses to legitimise attacks on Muslims.

Technology firms should:
- Work to promote positive initiatives both on social media and in organic searches, recognising that censoring extremist content alone is not enough to challenge a resilient ideology and sometimes even validates the beliefs of extremists.
- Acknowledge the important role that text plays, for example in forums, in answering questions of religious interpretation and the development of online communities. Previous private sector-backed efforts at counter-narrative content have focused largely on video content hosted on their own channels and have failed to engage in a sustained manner with the ideological nuance of Islamist extremism.
- Help governments understand the digital landscape before empowering local actors with appropriate technical tools to reach their intended audiences. Companies should provide technological support to allow information to be widely accessible, whether by phone, tablet, or computer.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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