TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL
CHANGE

Struggle Over Scripture

Charting the Rift Between Islamist Extremism and Mainstream Islam

MILO COMERFORD
RACHEL BRYSON

WITH A FOREWORD BY
DR EMMAN EL-BADAWY

CO-EXISTENCE

Contents

Foreword

The vast majority of Muslims are not terrorists and do not condone terrorism. This is an elementary point, but one that increasingly needs reiterating. Hardly a day passes without extremist Muslims being featured in the news for having committed a repugnant act. For those who know Islam only through the media, Muslims have become intimately associated with intolerance, violence, and oppression. The obvious questions that follow are: Does the tradition of Islam, and its intrinsic system of beliefs, contribute to or advocate these repulsive acts? And are Muslims who commit acts of terrorism inspired by the doctrines of the Islamic faith?

As a Muslim, I recognise that we cannot afford to refuse to critically engage with our own tradition. Consecutive generations of Muslims are increasingly finding space to interpret the fundamentals of our belief system in violent terms. However, before we can engage, we need to identify and delineate the competing interpretations that exist today within Muslim thought. Charting the divides within the Muslim mind, and the schisms between Muslim moderates and Muslim extremists, requires objective analysis of the various methods of engaging with scripture. Until now, conversations on the role of Islam in Islamist extremism and terrorism have been accusatory and polemical – or, at times, in denial. Both moderates and extremists claim to represent true and authentic Islam; both believe that their interpretation is closest to the divine message of God; and both insist that their convictions are rooted in the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Mohammad.

Data-driven research methodologies and analysis of theological and scriptural nuances are rarely combined as in this report. There is a paucity of

evidence-based research into the extent to which ideas and methods are shared by Islamist factions and the otherwise moderate mainstream within Islam. Through its analysis of the use and application of scripture, religious scholarship, and doctrinal concepts across Islamist, Salafi-jihadi, mainstream Sunni Islamic, and counter-narrative literature, this research traces the schisms and overlaps between mainstream and fringe interpretations of Islamic doctrine and dogma.

Through the commitment of the Institute for Global Change to the use of innovative methodologies and approaches, this report has revealed the ideological proximity of nonviolent Islamism and Salafi-jihadism. This finding, which marks a first step in ongoing research in this area, comes at a time when answers to the link between nonviolent and violent ideologies could not be more urgently in demand. This report confirms empirically for the first time what has long been known anecdotally: that Islamist extremists narrowly apply scripture and distort interpretations from the mainstream. Yet, this research also exposes

that much of the current counter-narrative literature falls short of competing directly with these distortions, often missing the balance between broad and targeted scriptural rebuttals.

Shortly before this foreword was written, over 300 Muslim worshippers were killed in a combined suicide bomb attack and shooting spree at a mosque in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. This incident highlights that Muslims are the principal victims of Islamist extremism worldwide. And while the vast majority of the global Muslim community is not extremist, the fact remains that extremist voices have had an impact on Islam that is wildly disproportionate to their numbers. Research that is driven by, and rooted in, evidence will help carve an informed response and build constructive partnerships against the perversion of religion.

Dr Emman El-Badawy
Head of Research, Co-existence,
Tony Blair Institute for Global Change

Quantifying the distinct interpretations that underpin a world religion, a theopolitical ideology, and a global jihadi insurgency.

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.[1] 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 rather against a perversion of the religion. This report aims to clarify

1 Pew Research Center, *Extremism Concerns Growing in West and Predominantly Muslim Countries*, Washington, DC: 2015, http://www.pew-global.org/2015/07/16/extremism-concerns-growing-in-west-and-pre-dominantly-muslim-countries/.

the nature of that perversion, to enable a religiously grounded response to Islamist extremism, in both its violent and its nonviolent forms.

Over the past year, debates have reached fever pitch around elections in Europe and across the Atlantic. A growing climate of intolerance has 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.[2] 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.[3] 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.

APPROACH

Making use of innovative natural language processing approaches, this study of over 3,000 mainstream, Islamist, Salafi-jihadi, and counter-narrative texts forms a quantitative picture of the key ideological differences between Islamist extremism, both violent and nonviolent, and the Islamic mainstream. This mainstream content, including Islamic jurisprudence, religious scholarship, and classical texts from authoritative institutions such as Egypt's

al-Azhar University, comprises an array of sources representing the breadth of the Sunni tradition. Using natural language processing software, we analysed recurring concepts and the use of religious scripture and scholarship in different categories of ideological content across Sunni Islam, ensuring a comparable data set.

The analysis presented in this report is data focused. There is considerable scope for religious scholars and those involved in countering extremist ideas to unpack our findings further. Recurring themes in our research include the inconsistent efficacy of counter-narratives and the ideological proximity of violent and nonviolent extremist texts. Our conclusions can provide a basis for an informed response by religious leaders, policymakers, and civil-society organisations, rooted in the significant differences between Islamist extremism and mainstream Islam identified by our analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

1 **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 eight 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, seven per cent of mainstream key themes had the potential to be interpreted through a violent lens.

2 **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. Some 64 per cent of the top Quranic verses quoted by Salafi-jihadis are in common with those cited by Islamists, while there is only 12 per cent crossover between Islamists and the mainstream. Islamist content has notably more concepts in common with Salafi-jihadi texts than with mainstream ones. This chimes with previous research on the close ideological relationship between violent and

---

2 Pew Research Center, *The Changing Global Religious Landscape*, Washington, DC: 2017, http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/#global-population-projections-2015-to-2060.

3 The National Counterterrorism Center, *2011 Report on Terrorism*, Washington, DC: 2011, https://fas.org/irp/threat/nctc2011.pdf. The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point estimated in 2009 that al-Qaeda killed seven times as many Muslims as non-Muslims: Muhammad al-Obaidi, Nassir Abdullah, and Scott Helfstein, Deadly Vanguards, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point: 2009, https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/deadly-vanguards-a-study-of-al-qaidas-violence-against-muslims.

nonviolent Islamist extremism, and the importance of countering both.[4]

3 | **Counter-narratives are failing to contest in the right theological places.** Counter-narratives should be taking on the key arguments peddled by extremists. But only 16 per cent of the central scriptural references used by Salafi-jihadis to justify their actions are substantively addressed in the counter-narrative content analysed. Some 40 per cent of the key ideological concepts of Salafi-jihadism are not prominently tackled in counter-narratives. Key counter-messages are roughly split three ways between taking on extremists' religious arguments, condemning extremists as un-Islamic, and presenting peaceful Islamic alternatives. But such approaches largely fail to balance rebutting the false claims of extremists with providing compelling alternatives that reclaim religious discourse from Islamist and jihadi ideologues.

4 | **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, with twice as many contemporary jihadi ideologues mentioned as Islamic scholars. This is problematic for extremists (both Islamist and anti-Muslim) who claim Salafi-jihadism is the historically rooted true face of Islam.

5 | **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. Some 89 per cent of the verses mentioned by Islamists, and 92 per cent in

the Salafi-jihadi sample, are Medinan verses of the Quran that are more concerned with community issues than with personal piety, compared with only 76 per cent in the mainstream texts.[5] The fact that extremists employ religious texts selectively to make their arguments can be used to undermine their claims of religious legitimacy.

6 | **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.

4 Mubaraz Ahmed, Milo Comerford, and Emman El-Badawy, *Milestones to Militancy*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, London: 2016, http://institute.global/sites/default/files/inline-files/IGC_Milestones-to-Militancy.pdf. Rachel Bryson, *For Caliph and Country*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, London: 2017, http://institute.global/insight/co-existence/caliph-and-country-exploring-how-british-jihadi-is-join-global-movement.

5 Medinan verses of the Quran are those believed by Muslims to have been revealed to the Prophet Mohammad after his migration from Mecca to Medina, as opposed to Meccan verses. See explainer in part 1 for further background.

Policy Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of our research, we make the following 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.

A Spectrum of Religious Content

Mainstream Islam

An aggregated view of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy. For the purposes of this research, this draws on a range of religious documents, including fatwas, communiqués, essays, and biographies, to create a cohesive control group that captures the broad brush of Sunni scholarly tradition.

In the mainstream sample, citation of classical scholarship is a default. Proportionally, mainstream sources cite over three times as many scholars as Salafi-jihadis do, the highest number across all content types.

Islamism

A modern religious-political ideology that requires a dominant role for an interpretation of Islam as state law. Although encompassing a broad spectrum, in this case our sample predominantly includes ideologues from Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The religious authorities cited in our Islamist content are dominated by 19th- and 20th-century Islamist ideologues. Four founders or leading members of Islamist movements alone make up 80 per cent of the references to scholars and ideologues in the top 50, and are referenced an average of eight times per document analysed.

Salafi-jihadism

A transnational religious-political ideology based on a belief in violent jihadism and return to the perceived Islam of the Prophet's followers. This is the worldview espoused by groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Salafi-jihadi texts reference the Quran and engage with religious concepts in a very narrow way. Salafi-jihadi content places clear importance on a few concepts and verses, working hard to articulate its narrow theological interpretation. Although there is variety within the top 50 of each category, there is an exponential decrease in the number of references to each of the concepts and verses. In comparison with other content types, Salafi-jihadi texts also reference considerably fewer scholars, with only one in the 10 most referenced figures in the texts. The rest are politicians, jihadi leaders, early caliphs, and Hadith collectors.

Counter-narrative

An alternative message that challenges an ideology. This may include religious or nonreligious messaging but for the purposes of this research includes only those narratives rooted in an Islamic response to extremism.

Counter-narratives draw on the smallest range of Quranic verses of all content types. This could be because counter-narratives are tailored towards attacking a specific worldview: the vast majority explicitly takes aim at Salafi-jihadi ideology, drawing on particular verses to achieve this aim. Many are not focused on articulating a comprehensive alternative worldview.

Tafsir (plural *tafasir*)

Commentary and scholarly interpretation of every verse in the Quran, in this case taken exclusively from Sunni, rather than Shia, accounts.

Introduction

Around the world, there is a growing politicised conflation of the religion of Islam and the global threat of extremism. A perception of Islam as a political ideology prone to violence now permeates far-right politics in Europe and the United States. An equal and opposite reaction has been a tendency to completely dissociate Islamist extremist views and behaviour from the religious and ideological domain.

Commentators and policymakers speak about the importance of countering extremist ideologies, but few are equipped with concrete facts of extremism perverting religious faith. This research is driven by a perceived lack of an evidence base to claims of whether groups such as ISIS or al-Qaeda are Islamic or not. It is an attempt to apply a data-driven approach to a largely anecdotal field. Understanding what relationship there is, if any, between extremist ideas and mainstream religious beliefs is essential if credible messengers are to effectively curb extremists' appeal.

Words matter. Vague terminology such as 'Islamic terrorism,' 'radical Islam,' and 'Islamic fascism' deliberately fosters an equivalence between violent extremism and the Islamic faith. This is the sort of rhetoric that allows far right vigilante groups turning away 'Islamic invaders' in the Western Balkans to frame their opposition to a religion at large around concerns over a jihadi threat.[6] Indeed, the far-right agrees with Islamist extremists on the interchangeability of Islam and Islamism; both believe that extremism is the only authentic expression of Islam.

Our previous research identified and outlined the ideology shared by Salafi-jihadi groups. *Inside the Jihadi Mind,* released in October 2015, found a transnational religious-political worldview based on a belief in violent jihadism and return to the perceived Islam of the Prophet's followers – universal principles

---

6 Dominic Kennedy, "Hate Groups Style Themselves as Knights Waging a Holy Crusade," *Times*, 26 November 2016, https://www.thetimes. co.uk/article/hate-groups-style-themselves-as-knights-waging-a-holy-crusade-pfkp9rnnm.

tailored in propaganda to fit local grievances.[7] This report builds on these findings, using new technologies and methodologies to demonstrate the extent to which extremist ideologies, notably Islamism and its Salafi-jihadi subset, deviate from the mainstream.

Using natural language processing software to comprehensively map these important theological distinctions, we analysed 3,151 documents in Arabic, English, and French. These documents were classified as mainstream, Islamist, Salafi-jihadi, or counter-narrative. There are algorithmic limitations associated with using software to map the highly subjective and nuanced phenomenon of religious discourse. However, paired with detailed qualitative analysis (we studied the top 50 results of each enquiry), natural language processing enabled us to both process large data sets and run creative comparative queries on the content. Such an approach allowed us to generate illuminating findings on the use of scripture, key scholars and religious figures, and the prominent religious concepts found across different types of Islamic content.

Recent polling across eight countries has shown that 90 per cent of people feel that Muslim voices are the most effective at rebutting extremist narratives.[8] However, the polarity of the conversation about the religiosity of extremism disempowers religious actors working to tackle extremists on the ideological playing field. We examined how a range of religiously rooted counter-narratives refers to religious authority in comparison with mainstream and extremist texts.

Finding Salafi-jihadi content was (alarmingly) easy. However, selecting a range of documents that captures the religious mainstream was a challenge given the breadth of this concept. This was compounded by the difficulty of defining 'orthodoxy' in any religious tradition, particularly in Sunni Islam, which is characterised by largely decentralised religious authority.

Our approach to defining the mainstream was aggregatory rather than normative. Drawing on a range of religious documents, including fatwas, communiqués (*bayanat*), essays, statements, and biographies, allowed us to create a useful control group of mainstream religious content to contrast with a much more cohesive corpus of extremist texts. We also captured the Islamic scholarly tradition by including classical *tafsir*, or commentary on the Quran, in our analysis. To ensure theological comparability, we only analysed sources from across the Sunni tradition for all four content types: mainstream, Islamist, Salafi-jihadi, and counter-narrative.

Policymakers must recognise that the battle against the extremism of groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda is not against Islam but rather against a distortion of religion. This report maps the nature of this distortion, comparing a spectrum of religious sources, as well as the techniques used to support the extremist worldview, and indicates how societies might collectively respond to discredit the foundations of extreme ideology.

7 Emman El-Badawy, Milo Comerford, and Peter Welby, *Inside the Jihadi Mind*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, London: 2015, https://institute.global/sites/default/files/inline-files/IGC_Inside%20 Jihadi%20Mind_18.08.17.pdf.

8 Center for Strategic & International Studies, *Survey Findings – Global Perceptions of Violent Extremism*, Washington, DC: 2016, https://www. csis.org/analysis/survey-findings-global-perceptions-violent-extremism.

Interpretations of Scripture

Unpacking the distinct ways scripture is used to validate extremist and mainstream stances.

Scripture is at the heart of the debate about how Islamist extremist ideas are legitimised and refuted on theological grounds. Commentators disagree about whether extremists instrumentalise scripture to support and provide religious credibility for otherwise political ideologies, or whether scripture itself is the prime mover for inspiring extremist worldviews. While some cite the Quran as the "source of extremism,"[9] the text is also the basis of faith for the overwhelming majority of Muslims who reject jihadi violence.[10] Both the Quran (God's revelation to the Prophet Mohammad for Muslims) and the Hadith (the reported sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the Prophet) are mined for verses that make the case for either a moderate or an extreme religious interpretation.

9 See, for example, *The Religion of Peace*, https://www.thereligionof-peace.com/.

10 David Pollock, "ISIS Has Already Lost the War of Ideas, Despite the Specter of Paris Attacks," *Washington Institute*, 16 November 2015, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/isis-has-al-ready-lost-the-war-of-ideas-despite-the-specter-of-paris-attacks.

Many religious texts contain a justification for violence or for peace, but there is a lack of detailed understanding about the broader roles scripture plays in affirming different religious interpretations. Our data provides an evidence base for understanding the distinctions between mainstream and extremist interpretations of the Quran. This is crucial if religious and political leaders are to deal with the problems caused by proponents of such ideologies.
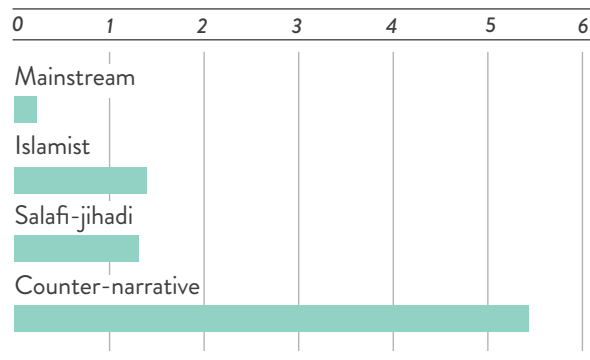
M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, an authoritative contemporary translator of the Quran, points out that "the Quran itself predicts … that some people will deliberately interpret certain verses in a skewed way":

In [the Quran] are verses [that are] precise – they are the foundation of the Book – and others unspecific. As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth], they will follow that of it which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah. [Quran 3:7][11]

Abdel Haleem states that the "Arabic of the Quran is very concise and attracted a sophisticated body of exegesis and commentary, including interpretations by those wishing to derive authoritative foundations for their sometimes extremist ideologies."[12] In this section, we map these differing scriptural interpretations and the ways both extremists and mainstream positions derive their 'authoritative foundations.'

A first glance at the data demonstrates the diverse use of Quranic references in different religious content (see figure 1.1). Across the sample of over 3,000 documents analysed, 3,800 separate verses of the Quran are referenced a total of 26,750 times. A close analysis of the top 50 results of each content type forms the basis of the findings in this section.

11 M.A.S. Abdul Haleem, *The Quran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), xxi. All Quranic translations are taken from Sahih International, accessed at https://quran.com/.

12 Abdul Haleem, *The Quran*, xxv.

FIG. 1.1 Quranic References by Content Type
References per document

SCRIPTURAL CROSSOVER

Overall, Salafi-jihadi and Islamist texts have striking scriptural crossover. Almost two-thirds of the most quoted verses in Salafi-jihadi documents feature also in the Islamist top 50. This overlap demonstrates that while Islamists and Salafi jihadis disagree on tactics, their use of scripture is remarkably similar (see table 1.2).

TABLE 1.2 Most Quoted Quranic Verses in Salafi-Jihadi and Islamist Content

	Salafi-Jihadi		Islamist
1	Al-Anfal, verse 39	1	Al-Anfal, verse 39
2	Al-Tawbah, verse 14	2	Al-Maida, verse 51
3	Al-Anfal, verse 60	3	Al-Anfal, verse 60
4	Al-Mumtahanah, verse 4	4	Al-Anfal, verse 17
5	Al-Maida, verse 54	5	Al-Tawbah, verse 111
6	Al-Tawbah, verse 111	6	Al-Mumtahanah, verse 4
7	Al-Haj, verse 40	7	Al-Haj, verse 40
8	Al-Maida, verse 51	8	Al-Tawbah, verse 29
9	Al-Tawbah, verse 38	9	Al-Baqarah, verse 120
10	Al-Baqarah, verse 249	10	Al-Mujadila, verse 22

Crossover of scriptural usage is not as strong between Salafi-jihadi and mainstream materials. In fact, there is only eight per cent similarity in the most common verses that these two categories draw on. Counter-narrative materials refer heavily to scripture to build a firm and tailored case against extremists' worldview, causing the number of scriptural references to be comparably high.

KEY THEMES

Analysis of the prominent Quranic quotations in each category reveals much about the message the texts' authors are trying to communicate as well as their approach to using scripture to affirm it.

Salafi-Jihadi: Selective and Fixated With Violence

The top Quranic verses quoted in Salafi-jihadi propaganda demonstrate the movement's main justifications for, and defence of, jihadi violence. It is revealing that the most frequent verse featured in the Salafi-jihadi content (quoted in over one-third of the documents in the sample) is taken from the *Surat al-Anfal* (The Spoils of War chapter), which reflects on the aftermath of a battle between the early Muslims and their Meccan opponents:

And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows. And whatever you spend in the cause of Allah will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged. [8:60]

Although eight of the 50 most quoted verses in Salafi-jihadi texts come from this chapter, notably missing from jihadi propaganda is the context of the verse that follows:

And if they incline to peace, then incline to it [also] and rely upon Allah. Indeed, it is He who is the Hearing, the Knowing. [8:61]

Such quotations chime with recurring themes across Salafi-jihadism's most referenced Quranic verses, including martyrdom, pride in the underdog status of the jihadi movement in which victory derives from Allah alone, and an emphasis on vindication in the

afterlife for earthly sacrifice. These ideas distort Islamic principles to produce a single-minded focus on violent jihad.

Visible across the top results is the principle of *al-Wala wal-Bara* (loyalty and disavowal), which extremists use to justify their rejection of non-Islamic practices and peoples. Extremists argue that different religions cannot co-exist, by often referring to a verse from *Surat al-Maida* (The Table Spread chapter).

Do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies. They are in fact allies of one another. And whoever is an ally to them among you – then indeed, he is one of them. [5:51]

This verse is present in 10 per cent of Salafi-jihadi documents analysed. By cherry-picking verses, extremists present conflict with other faiths as a default and a test for the faithful.

Although verses such as the one above constitute a minority in the scriptural texts quoted, verses that have a backdrop of violence and are taken out of context permeate the sample of Salafi-jihadi material.

Islamist: Nonviolent but Extremist

Islamists' choices of Quranic quotations are notable for their thematic similarity with the Salafi-jihadi sample, although generally framed in a less violent manner. Themes such as the necessary conflict between Islam and other faiths, for example, are tempered by references to the *jizyah* (a tax on non-Muslim 'people of the book' such as Jews and Christians) as an alternative to violence:

Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture – until they give the jizyah willingly while they are humbled. [9:29]

While not necessarily or explicitly invoking violence, such verses legitimise a binary worldview similar to that of the violent extremists and promote practices that enforce hardship on non-Muslims. The ideological overlaps between Islamism and Salafi-jihadism are echoed in data findings elsewhere in this report.

As in the Salafi-jihadi sample, the afterlife and repentance are prevalent themes in the scripture quoted by Islamists. Quranic references to governance and the obligations of an Islamic state are absent from the top Islamist results, which is notable because Islamist ideology is premised on the notion of a religiously ruled caliphate.

Counter-Narratives: Presenting a Peaceful Alternative Reading

To establish key themes in the way scripture was used across counter-narratives, we identified 50 of the most quoted Quranic verses in the material as serving one of three purposes. Texts either **present alternative interpretations** of Islamic tenets and values to extremists, **condemn the actions** of extremists through references to scripture, or directly **confront the verses** that extremists use to affirm their arguments.

There are few attempts to quote verses that directly condemn extremists' actions as un-Islamic. Yet many efforts provide an alternative, peaceful framing of the religion or take on extremists' quotation of the Quran head-on, by providing important context to verses (see figure 1.3).

FIG. 1.3 Counter-Narrative Uses of Scripture
Per cent of references
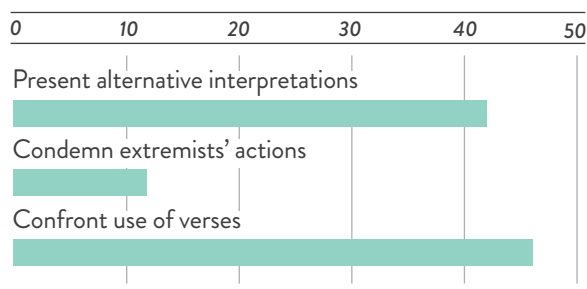
Counter-narrative use of the Quran largely focuses on extremism as an aberration from God's revelation. The top three quoted verses in the sample are from *Surat al-Maida* (The Table Spread chapter), used in almost 50 per cent of all counter-narrative documents analysed, including the verse:

Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land – it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one – it is as if he had saved mankind entirely. [5:32]

Meanwhile, verses from *Surat al-Haj* (The Pilgrimage chapter), which are quoted in 20 per cent of counter-narrative texts, emphasise that violent jihad could only ever be waged in defence:

Allah defends the people. Permission to fight has been given to those who are being fought, because they are wrong. [22:39–40]

And a verse from *Surat al-Nisa* (The Women chapter), the 19th most quoted in the sample, frames extremists as being worthy of God's punishment:

But whoever kills a believer intentionally – his recompense is Hell, wherein he will abide eternally, and Allah has become angry with him and has cursed him and has prepared for him a great punishment. [4:93]

Some experts have pointed out that such a directly adversarial approach to tackling a cohesive system of ideas like Salafi-jihadism might legitimise extremist ideologies. J.M. Berger, an expert on jihadi and far-right extremism, has suggested that an approach instead based on undermining texts central to extremist groups might be particularly beneficial "for diverting at-risk people at the curiosity and consideration stages of individual radicalization."[13]

Counter-narratives may not be addressing the most exploited extracts from the Quran. There is only a 16 per cent crossover in the most referenced verses of the Quran quoted in counter-narrative and Salafi-jihadi documents. In countering extremist narratives, such documents do not appear to be engaging with the parts of the Quran that extremists use to bolster their arguments.

This relates to the broader question raised by our findings – whether counter-narrative content should directly take on extremist interpretations of specific verses or offer an alternative vision rooted in other parts of scripture. The attempts analysed in this study largely fail to strike an effective balance between undermining extremist interpretations and affirming the mainstream. A balanced combination of scriptural

13 J.M. Berger, "Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 7 (2017), 59–61.

approaches that demonstrate the aberration of extremists, take on their claims to religiosity, and offer a coherent alternative will be necessary in efforts to combat extremist ideologies effectively.

BREADTH OF QUOTATION

There is telling diversity in the breadth of references to the Quran across our sample. In comparison with the mainstream, Islamist, and Salafi-jihadi material, counter-narratives draw on the fewest chapters of the Quran. This could be because counter-narratives, the vast majority of which aim at tackling Salafi-jihadi and violent ideology, are tailored towards attacking a specific subject matter and draw on particular verses to achieve this aim. Many are not focused on articulating a comprehensive alternative worldview, something that needs to be achieved.

While Salafi-jihadi texts refer to the Quran more than mainstream content does, the references have a much narrower scope. Salafi-jihadi content focuses on a few verses, working hard to support its narrow interpretation with Quranic verses. In some ways, it quotes heavily: scriptural backing is of clear importance to Salafi-jihadi writers, and there are five times more references to the Quran in Salafi-jihadi texts than in mainstream content.

However, in the 50 most referenced verses found in Salafi-jihadi content, there is an exponential decrease in the frequency of references to specific verses (see figure 1.4). The mainstream approach is more equally distributed across the Quran, with a broad thematic approach, reflecting the wider subject matter it tends to address.

Different jihadi groups draw on similar verses of the Quran in their propaganda, showing a coherence in approach to scripture across the movement.[14] The holistic and reflective approach to scripture in mainstream texts, however, means that fewer specific verses and elements of the Quran stand out in the sample. The breadth of mainstream reference to scripture does act as a useful control in this research, to show the distance between extremists' use of the Quran and orthodox approaches.

_____

14 El-Badawy, Comerford, and Welby, *Inside the Jihadi Mind*, 63.

FIG. 1.4 Frequency of the 50 Most Quoted Quranic Verses in Salafi-Jihadi and Mainstream Content
References per document

50 most quoted verses, from 1 to 50
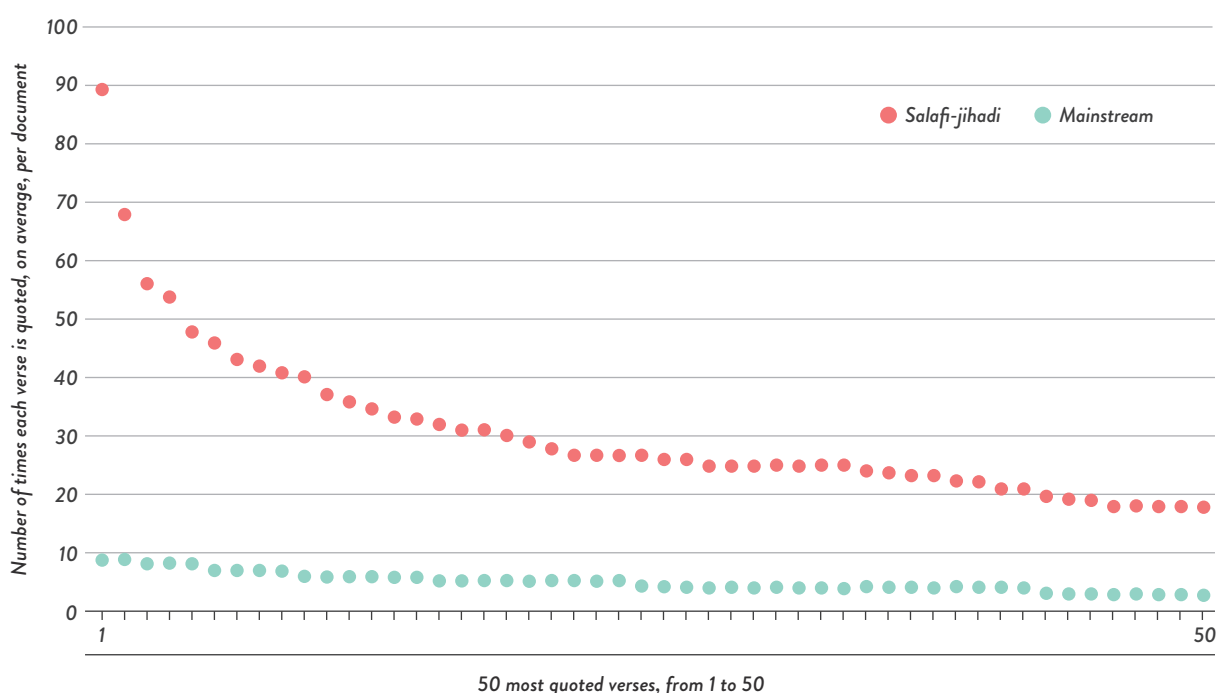
Explainer
MECCAN AND MEDINAN VERSES

The verses of the Quran are divided between those revealed to the Prophet Mohammad in Mecca and in Medina, before and after the early Muslims' migration between the two cities. There are notable distinctions between the thematic content of these categories, related to the relative situation of the Muslim community at the time. The earlier Meccan verses are more concerned with personal piety, foundational beliefs, and the afterlife, whereas the later Medinan verses coincide with a more pragmatic, jurisprudential Islam.

Salafi-jihadi content gives considerably greater weighting than mainstream content does to the Medinan sections of the Quran, in which the concepts of jihad, jurisprudence, and relations with non-Muslims are explored in depth. The number of Medinan verses, compared with Meccan ones, is high across the board. Yet the proportion in extremist literature is particularly stark. Some 76 per cent of references to the Quran in mainstream content are Medinan. However, 89 per cent of the total references to the Quran in Islamist content, and as many as 92 per cent in Salafi-jihadi documents, are Medinan.

These findings map onto a complex theological debate about the abrogation of earlier verses of the Quran by later ones. In some Islamic traditions, the later the revelation, the greater the authority of the verses. Yet most extremist claims about abrogation justifying violence are contested by mainstream scholars. Regardless, these findings show that extremist content is more concerned with the portions of scripture that address the legalistic and normative elements of the faith.

HADITH

Although most of our scriptural analysis focused on the Quran, we also explored the use of Hadith, the reported sayings, deeds, and tacit approvals of the Prophet Mohammad, across the samples. Hadith's scriptural importance is related to its strength, with some weaker and some more sound. Authority is given to Hadith through its *isnad*, or chain of transmission. The individuals' lives in the chain were highly scrutinised by early Muslim scholars, permitting them to endorse the genuine nature of the genealogy. Only the six Hadith collectors considered by most Sunni Muslims to be canonical – *Kutub al-Sittah* (The Six Books) – were included in the analysis.

Overall, Hadith plays a lesser role in the sample than Quranic verses do. Across the database, there are more than twice as many references per document to the Quran as to Hadith. However, the differing usage of Hadith still shines light on how distinct categories of content have recourse to religious authority.

Compared with the mainstream texts, Salafi-jihadi and Islamist content use considerably more Hadith. Per document analysed, Hadith was referenced in an average of 67 per cent of Salafi-jihadi documents, 60 per cent of Islamist content, and 20 per cent of mainstream documents. This shows that extremists rely on Hadith considerably more than the mainstream does to justify their theological arguments, largely echoing the relative usage of the Quran across these categories. Degrees of reliance on Hadith in mainstream literature often depends on the tradition and school of thought in which the literature originates. The reduced reliance on and reference to Hadith in the mainstream may therefore be the result of the diversity of the sample.

Scholar Usama Hasan has argued that members of ISIS "constantly refer to the Hadith, because they think they can follow the pure prophetic example, and also because they think that way they will be blessed by God, that their actions will be in some way correct, even if they make no sense in the real world in terms of modern values."[15] As with the Quran, some counter-narrative efforts have worked to contextualise ISIS' usage of apocalyptic Hadith.[16]

There is considerable similarity in the Hadith verses drawn on by Salafi-jihadi and Islamist texts. The data reveals a 50 per cent crossover between the 50 most referenced verses of the two samples. In contrast,

---

15 Usama Hasan, "Five Questions on... Responding to ISIS," Tony Blair Faith Foundation, 6 November 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nEHQmdTQPZU.

16 Imam Zaid Shakir, "Dabiq: An Argument Against ISIS," *New Islamic Directions*, 6 July 2016, https://www.newislamicdirections.com/nid/notes/dabiq_an_argument_against_isis.

there is only a 16 per cent and a 14 per cent similarity when comparing mainstream content with Islamist and with Salafi-jihadi texts, respectively. Violent and apocalyptic Hadiths are often held up as examples of the Islamic origins of ISIS' and al-Qaeda's ideology. It is therefore significant that mainstream use of Hadith is statistically distinct from that of extremists.

Analysis of how Hadith is applied across different types of literature reveals a similar pattern to the use of Quranic scripture. When mainstream texts draw on Hadith, they do so broadly, making reference to a variety of content. While Salafi-jihadi texts invoke Hadith more widely, they do so selectively, quoting parts that affirm their fixation on violence. Thus, although Salafi-jihadi literature makes six times more references to Hadith than the mainstream does, it draws on only three times as many sections, showing the relative limitation of Hadith quoted in Salafi-jihadi literature.

The Salafi method, which rejects the concept of *madhab* (schools of thought in Islamic jurisprudence) as religious 'innovation,' exists in a theological terrain where the Quran and Hadith are the sole sources of religious authority. The literalist interpretation that has come to be associated with the Salafi approach to scripture differs from the mainstream, which typically draws on 1,400 years of religious tradition and debate, alongside the religious texts.

Although Salafi-jihadis can be seen to adopt a similar principle to the Salafi method, typically discarding scholarly consultation and debate, nonviolent Salafi leaders are in a position to explicitly challenge their fixation on extremist violence as the true reflection of the Quran and Hadith, with an approach rooted in scripture.

Across both the Quran and Hadith, a clear picture emerges of how extremist and mainstream religious approaches use scripture in a dramatically varying manner. Whereas Islamist and Salafi-jihadi content goes to great lengths to affirm the religious legitimacy of its projects through references to scripture, the selective use of quotations compared with a mainstream control sample is evident.

Exposing extremists' unorthodox recourse to scripture is essential in demonstrating the theological gap between the mainstream and the extreme, helping to rob extremists of the religious legitimacy they crave. This is crucial in winning the argument against their worldview.

■

Case Study
EXTREMIST AND MAINSTREAM INTERPRETATIONS OF SURAT AL-BAQARAH

Prominent Muslim scholars have used verse 256 of *Surat al-Baqarah* (The Cow chapter), which begins "There shall be no compulsion in [the acceptance of] religion," to affirm religious pluralism and reject intolerance. But alongside its use in counter-narrative texts, there are recurring references to this verse in both Salafi-jihadi and Islamist documents. How does each ideological stance unpack this verse in a way that aligns with its worldview?

A **counter-narrative** fatwa that condemns violent jihad and attacking civilians quotes verse 256 of *al-Baqarah* in reference to religious freedom. The text states it is incumbent on a Muslim to not be hostile to non-Muslims without reason. The document states that within Islam, there is a guaranteed freedom of belief and individuals have the right to embrace what they desire. This is backed up through reference to *Surat al-Kahf* (The Cave chapter), verse 28: "The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills – let him believe; and whoever wills – let him disbelieve."

A document from **Islamist** group Jamaat-e-Islami reveals a distinct interpretation of this verse. It states that "Allah has granted freedom to all human beings either to accept Islam or not. He has forbidden to apply force to convert any one to Islam." The group clarifies that it is the duty of the prophets and their followers to show the true path and present it with conviction.

In *Inspire*, an al-Qaeda magazine, a **Salafi-jihadi** interpretation of the verse reveals that the movement ignores the part that states the lack of compulsion in religion, and focuses on the second part that distinguishes the right course from the wrong. The al-Qaeda document aligns the verse with the shahada – the Islamic profession of faith, "there is no god but

God" – clearly stating what the group considers to be the right path: "disbelieving in *taghut* [worship of other gods than Allah] and believing in Allah." When individuals do not abide by this declaration, Salafi-jihadis consider themselves justified in attacking such unbelievers.

While the mainstream and counter-narrative stances state the verse depicts freedom of religion, some extremists have claimed that verse 256 of *al-Baqarah* is abrogated by verse 5 of *Surat at-Tawbah* (The Repentance chapter):

> And when the forbidden months have past, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give zakah, let them [go] on their way. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.

Extremists argue that this statement implies every unbeliever who does not accept Islam must be fought. However, a **mainstream** document in our sample argues this verse does not abrogate the principle in Islamic law that there is no compulsion in religion, as it is to be read in context. This lays bare the importance of reading scripture within a wider framework of other religious text. It also emphasises the importance of unpacking the narrow way extremists justify their violent ideology.

∎

Religious Concepts

Exploring the dominant religious ideas discussed in mainstream and extremist texts.

To fully plot the distinction between mainstream and extreme stances requires going beyond simply how they use religious authority differently. This section explores the key concepts that emerge throughout the texts and the distinct ideas that arise from different interpretations.

Exploring concepts allowed us to directly contrast the arsenal of ideas deployed across different categories of content. Through natural language processing, we identified discrete concepts that could be drawn from texts based on certain language indicators and framing of ideas.[17] In this section, we unpack the major concepts explored in each category and the extent to which such ideas substantively differ between content types. We also look at how broad the spread of concepts is in each category.

---

17 The vagueness of the term 'concepts' was a potential limitation on the scope for meaningful analysis. When drawing out salient concepts from the sample, we therefore removed references to people, names, objects, locations, and historical events. This allowed us to focus on expressions of moderate, reformist, and extremist religious perspectives – primarily conceptions of core ideological principles and theologically framed references to other religious groups.

Glossary:
Key Concepts

Sharia: Islamic law or norms as revealed in the Quran and the practices of the Prophet Mohammad, interpreted and applied by Islamic jurists through multiple schools of thought. Islamist groups often claim to be implementing their interpretation of sharia through their actions.

Dhimmitude: The historical status of a non-Muslim 'person of the book' (primarily Jews and Christians), subject to a *dhimmi* pact, whereby a minority living under Islamic rule was accorded a protected status and allowed to retain its original faith.

Jizyah: A historic tax levied in Islamic states on non-Muslim people of the book as part of a *dhimmi* pact, to permanently reside in the land.

Caliphate: A form of Islamic governance that emerged after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. The leader, known as the caliph, must be appointed by consultation according to Sunni thought and should represent the interests of the entire Muslim community.

Fitna: Strife, trial, or temptation. The term was used in the earliest years of the Muslim community to refer to unrest, division, or rebellion, especially against a rightful ruler.

Tawhid: The fundamental Islamic tenet of the unity of God. The opposite of *shirk,* it refers to an unequivocal belief in a single God, omnipotent and without partners. The jihadi concept is an extreme interpretation of a belief generally held across the Abrahamic faiths.

Shirk: Idolatry or polytheism, literally associating others with God. The opposite of *tawhid.*

Salaf: The first three generations of Muslims after the Prophet Mohammad. The time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

Ummah: Global Muslim community.

KEY THEMES

Our previous research revealed a cohesive system of ideas that underpins Salafi-jihadi ideology and propaganda. This extremist worldview is built on mainstream Islamic principles, which it distorts to produce a single-minded focus on violent jihad.[18] Our latest research allows us to examine in greater comparative detail the distinction between key ideological themes across extremist and mainstream positions.

The religious themes that emerge across our sample can be broadly categorised into two frames: concepts that centre on one's perceived corporate and communal duty; and those more focused on personal, individual piety. Examples of the first range from sharia law and the caliphate to the *jizyah* and fitna. The second category encompasses *tawhid*, worship, and the afterlife. While a Salafi-jihadi reading of such concepts often manifests itself violently, mainstream texts are characterised by a peaceful interpretation.

There is overlap between these categories. For example, although jihad can have a military application, a broader interpretation concerns personal piety and spiritual struggle. A radical interpretation of *tawhid* would shift the mainstream concept of monotheism to a violent intolerance of idolatry.[19] However, the relative weighting of these concepts is revealing of a text's ideological priorities, and the variance in the priorities of such concepts is clear between mainstream and extreme content (see table 2.1).

In data terms, there is a 46 per cent crossover in the conceptual content of Salafi-jihadi and mainstream content, while the overlap between Islamist and mainstream concepts is 52 per cent. Notably, the similarity between Islamist and Salafi-jihadi content is considerable higher, at 70 per cent, with concepts such as jihad, an Islamic state or caliphate, and concern with polytheism and non-Muslims in common. As the findings for scripture and scholarship also attest, Islamists' attempts to present themselves as part of the religious mainstream are not borne out by our conceptual analysis.

---

18 El-Badawy, Comerford, and Welby, *Inside the Jihadi Mind*.

19 "War is Not the Way: Peace is the Path," *Sandala*, 4 May 2015, https://sandala.org/war-is-not-the-way-peace-is-the-path/.

TABLE 2.1 Most Referenced Concepts in Mainstream, Islamist, and Salafi-Jihadi Content

	Mainstream	Islamist	Salafi-Jihadi
1	Prayers	Jihad	Jihad
2	Performing Islamic duty	Worship	Mujahideen
3	Islamic finance	Sharia law	Islamic state
4	Fasting	Islamic state	Caliphate
5	Preaching	Caliphate	Non-Muslims
6	Non-Muslims	Temporal world	Polytheism
7	Ummah	*Tawhid*	Martyrdom
8	Praying	Polytheism	Companions of the Prophet
9	Believers	Non-Muslims	Performing deeds for the sake of Allah
10	Temporal world	Proselytisation	Islamic pledge of allegiance

While the high conceptual crossover between Islamist and Salafi-jihadi texts is revealing, so is the 30 per cent of conceptual content that is distinct. It neatly reflects a distinction between violent and nonviolent extremism: the top concepts distinct to the Salafi-jihadi category include martyrdom, apostasy, and military jihad, while Islamists alone discuss Muslim society, tyranny, and dhimmitude.

Although many of the top 10 results in the Salafi-jihadi and Islamist categories are similar, Islamists place a higher focus on worship, which is the category's second most frequently cited concept, and proselytisation. Only the top results of the Salafi-jihadi category make repeated reference to the companions of the Prophet Mohammad, reflecting their predominant focus on the *Salaf* as a source of religious authority. The bulk of the results in the top mainstream concepts revolve around performing one's basic Islamic duties, reflecting the norms of moderate religious practice.

UNPACKING CONCEPTS IN CONTEXT

Salafi-Jihadi vs Mainstream

Mainstream content places a higher priority on personal piety than does Salafi-jihadi content, which focuses on one's perceived corporate and communal duty. In fact, there is an inverse relationship between the priorities given to these two categories. While 'prayers,' 'fasting,' and 'preaching' appear first, fourth, and fifth respectively in the mainstream content, these respective concepts are ranked 33rd, 38th, and 43rd in the Salafi-jihadi content (see figure 2.2).
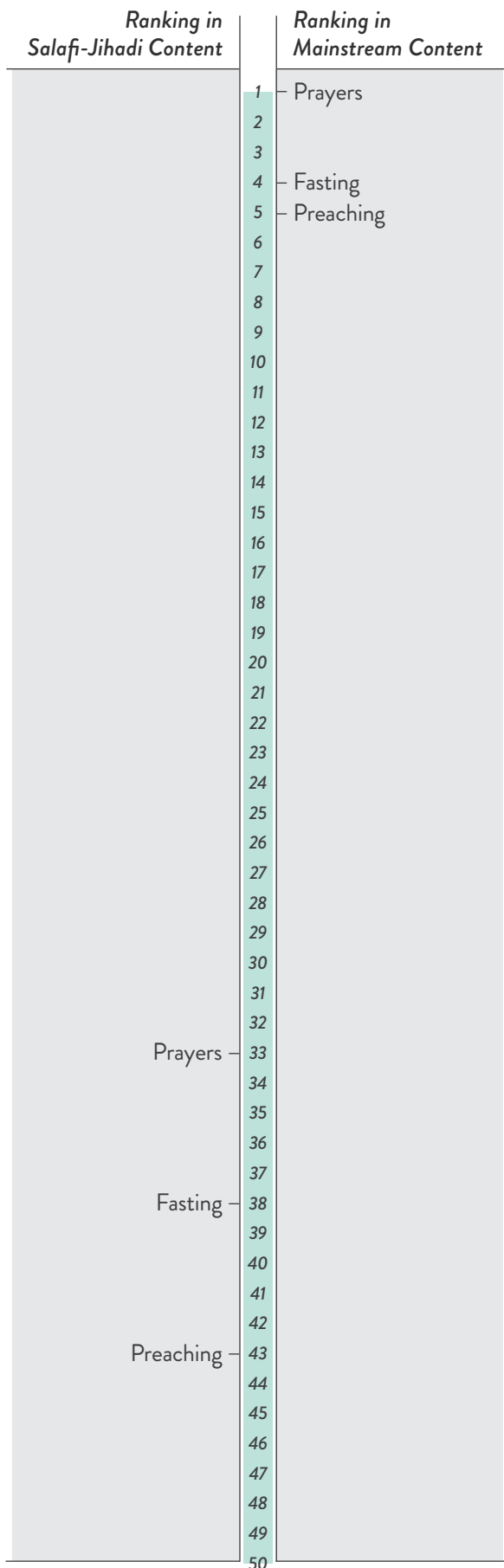
Equally revealing are the concepts that are prioritised only in Salafi-jihadi texts. 'Mujahideen' and 'Islamic state,' ranked second and third in the Salafi-jihadi texts, do not appear in the 50 most referenced concepts in the mainstream sample. This placement of concepts in both content types reflects the priority authors place on distinct aspects of Islamic thought and practice.

Salafi-jihadi references to concepts are much narrower than those in mainstream texts, demonstrating that, as with scripture, extremists are highly selective about Islamic tenets that fit their ideology. Salafi-jihadi content places clear importance on a few concepts, working hard to articulate its narrow theological interpretation.

Although the Salafi-jihadi sample maintains variety in the concepts it explores, there is an exponential decrease in the number of references to each of the top concepts. While 'jihad,' the most frequent concept, appears on average 59 times per document, the concepts from the sixth most referenced onwards all arise fewer than 10 times each. In contrast, the spread is more even across the mainstream category, reflecting a more balanced treatment of religious concepts, including prayers and fasting.

Previous textual analysis of religious content has also found a strong conceptual disconnect between mainstream and jihadi documents. Research by Richard A. Nielsen, associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has found that jihadi fatwas strongly correlated violence with discussions of Salafism, politics, and sharia, while non-jihadi texts were likely to focus on issues such as prayer, Ramadan, money, pilgrimage,

FIG. 2.2 Religious Concepts in Salafi-Jihadi and Mainstream Content

Ranking in Salafi-Jihadi Content	Ranking in Mainstream Content	
	1	Prayers
	2	
	3	
	4	Fasting
	5	Preaching
	6	
	7	
	8	
	9	
	10	
	11	
	12	
	13	
	14	
	15	
	16	
	17	
	18	
	19	
	20	
	21	
	22	
	23	
	24	
	25	
	26	
	27	
	28	
	29	
	30	
	31	
	32	
Prayers	33	
	34	
	35	
	36	
	37	
Fasting	38	
	39	
	40	
	41	
	42	
Preaching	43	
	44	
	45	
	46	
	47	
	48	
	49	
	50	

and marriage. This distinction also results from the different textual formats of extremist and mainstream religious content. While a "jihadist fatwa is article-length and ranges across multiple topics … the non-jihadist fatwa is paragraph length and gives a precise ruling on only one topic."[20]

Militarism and Extremism in Jihadi Content

To categorise the thematic content of the Salafi-jihadi concepts, we drew out those that focused on military or extreme ideas. 'Military' denotes those concepts that are explicitly connected to violence, and 'extreme' refers to those references that, while often having a peaceful application in mainstream Islam, have been interpreted in an extremist frame in the Salafi-jihadi context.

At least 28 per cent of the top 50 concepts arising in the Salafi-jihadi sample are explicitly military in focus, appearing an average of 12 times per document. A further 40 per cent are concepts that are mainstream in most religious contexts but that are interpreted in an extreme manner in the Salafi-jihadi case, such as polytheism, sharia, *tawhid*, and the ummah. Together, military and extreme ideas dominate the sample, constituting 86 per cent of the total references to concepts across the 50 most recurring themes.

We applied the same lens to mainstream content, which served as a control group highlighting Salafi-jihadis' overemphasis on ambiguous religious concepts that could be considered military or radical. In mainstream content, such concepts comprised a maximum of 30 per cent of the top 50 most prevalent ideas (seven per cent military, 23 per cent extreme).

Importantly, this figure was largely made up of concepts that could be interpreted through an extremist lens, but are generally not. For example, concepts like jihad, in the mainstream context, are not applied solely to a perceived obligation towards holy war, as in Salafi-jihadism. Mainstream content places considerably less conceptual focus on the disputed religious concepts that Salafi-jihadis otherwise rely on to affirm their rigid interpretations.

20 Richard A. Nielsen, *The lonely Jihadist: Weak networks and the radicalization of Muslim clerics*, Harvard University (PhD Thesis), Cambridge, MA: 2013.

Counter-Narrative vs. Salafi-Jihadi Approaches

To better understand the counter-narrative approach to rebutting extreme concepts, as in the scriptural analysis, we coded the top 50 most referenced ideas according to three purposes. Texts either **offer alternative depictions** of Islamic doctrines and principles to extremists, **condemn the actions** of extremists, or directly **engage with conceptual claims** used in extremist arguments, unpacking why such a stance is flawed. In several instances, counter-narrative materials perform more than one of these three purposes at once (see figure 2.3). Some concepts, such as the application of Islamic law or the authority of the Prophet's companions, are used both to contest extremists' claims to religious legitimacy and to draw on them to provide an alternative message to the extremists.

FIG. 2.3 Counter-Narrative Uses of Religious Concepts

Per cent of references
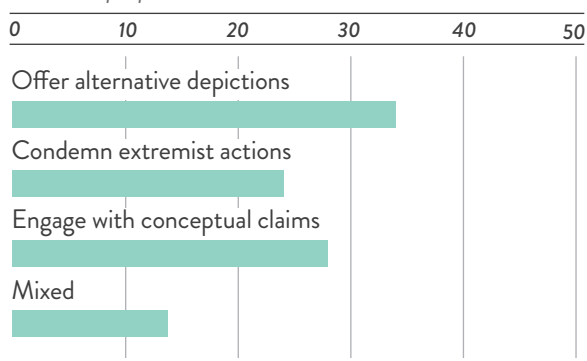
Throughout the counter-narrative material, there appears to be a relatively even balance of conceptual approaches to tackling Salafi-jihadi ideology. This is further demonstrated by the fact that there is a 60 per cent overlap in the top concepts in counter-narrative and Salafi-jihadi content, indicating that counter-narratives seem to operate in a more correct space conceptually than scripturally, by addressing similar thematic areas as Salafi-jihadi texts.

The counter-narrative and Islamist samples have a 50 per cent similarity, suggesting the broad array of counter-narratives are shaped more for refuting Salafi-jihadi ideas than Islamist ones. This implies that such narratives are slightly less geared to challenging nonviolent extremism than to focusing on extremist ideologies that mobilise violence as a tactic.

The top 10 conceptual results of counter-narrative content are particularly tailored to confronting the Salafi-jihadi system of ideas. Nine of the top 10 concepts in counter-narrative and Salafi-jihadi content are in common with the other category. Within these top results, only counter-narratives refer to suicide (usually condemned as un-Islamic), while Salafi-jihadis alone talk about the Islamic pledge of allegiance (*bayah*). Compared with their use of scripture and scholarship, counter-narratives reveal a more successfully targeted approach to countering the ideological concepts in Salafi-jihadi propaganda.

▪

Case Study
TEXTUAL TREATMENT OF THE CALIPHATE

The concept of the caliphate has been the subject of renewed debate since ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the existence of a so-called Islamic state across Iraq and Syria on 29 June 2014. The vast majority of Muslims believe that an Islamic state, led by a caliph as its political and religious leader, has not existed since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924. But jihadi groups see the restoration of the model of governance pioneered by the Prophet Mohammad and his earliest companions as essential to their theopolitical project. Islamist groups, meanwhile, advocate for a gradualist movement towards such a state, governed by a strict interpretation of sharia law.

Across counter-narratives, the caliphate is the 19th most regularly cited concept, with an average of just over two references per document. In the mainstream texts, it is 30th, with a mention in 20 per cent of all documents. In Islamist content, caliphate is fifth, with 6.6 references per document, while in Salafi-jihadi texts it comes fourth, with a remarkable 22.5 mentions per document (see figure 2.4). Evidently the Islamist and Salafi-jihadi categories place a greater emphasis on the concept of a caliphate than the mainstream does.

From a **Salafi-jihadi** perspective, the first issue of ISIS' magazine *Dabiq* emphasises the religious obligation on all Muslims to defend and undertake *hijrah* (migration) to the caliphate, as well as referencing the apocalyptic overtones of the battle to protect it:

FIG. 2.4 Ranking of the Concept 'Caliphate' Across Content Types
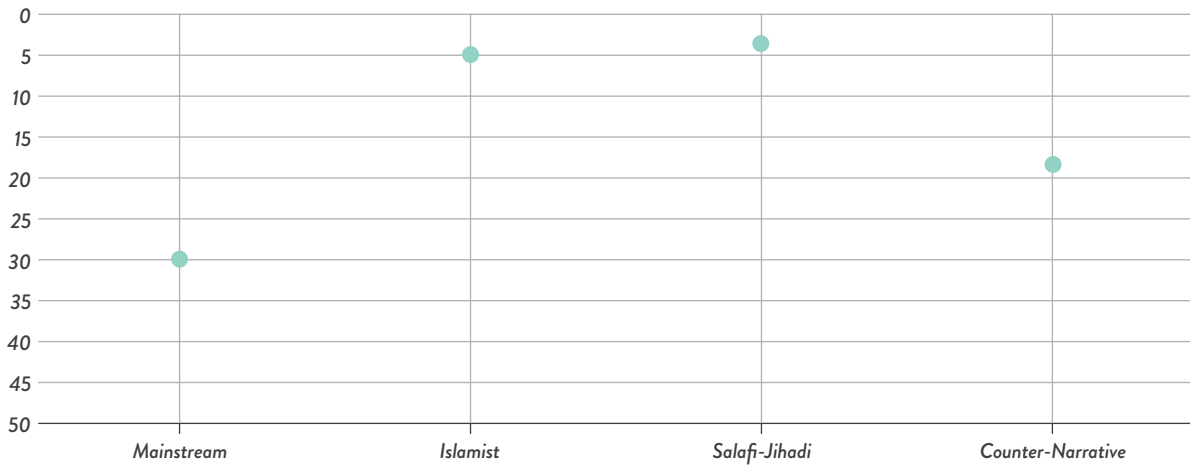
The obligation is now clearer than ever before for all Muslims to raise their voices and pledge their allegiance to Imamul-Muslimin and AmirulMu'minin – the Khalifah [caliph] – Abu Bakr al-Husayni al-Baghdadi (may Allah raise his allies and humiliate his enemies). May Allah protect this Khalifah state and continue guiding it until its legions fight the crusader armies who will gather near Dabiq.

Islamists speak of the caliphate in less urgent terms, even as they advocate for the imminent need for sharia as state law. *The Islamic Way of Life*, written by founder of Jamaat-e-Islami Abul Ala Maududi, discusses the interaction of democracy and the caliphate, in an attempt to reconcile a state under the sovereignty of God with human agency:

The authority of caliphate is bestowed on any community which accepts the principles of Tawhid and Risalat [prescriptions in Islamic jurisprudence]. In such a society, each individual shares the God-given caliphate. This is the point where democracy begins in Islam.

Counter-narrative approaches to discrediting the appeal of the caliphate take a number of forms. In his response to ISIS, *This is Not the Path to Paradise*, contemporary Islamic scholar Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah emphasises a caliphate was not required in Islamic history for upholding Islam, safeguarding law and sacred sites, and maintaining peace:

There is no religious duty to pursue the establishment of a caliphate by force—even if

we assume it is possible to do so. What then of those who spread corruption in the land, kill the innocent, terrorize the weak, destroy mosques and houses of worship, and disinter tombs? As Ibn Qayyim [a medieval Islamic theologian] records, the Prophet Muhammad, God's peace and blessings upon him, and the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs never destroyed a church, synagogue, or temple![21]

As for the **mainstream** approach, the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration, issued by Islamic leaders and scholars on the status of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries, claims that extremists have stolen the true meaning of the caliphate:

Killing, displacement, conflagration, or expulsion ... these are the actions of criminal groups that have stolen the name of Islam, the term "caliphate," and the identity of the ummah (Muslim community). All of these terms are falsely used by them, and falsehood was built upon them.[22]

The recent growth in the prominence of debate around the notion of a caliphate in Islamic discourse means it is important that counter-narratives take on Salafi-jihadi claims to theocratic governance and statehood, alongside their narrow interpretation of jihad, to comprehensively undermine extremists' ideological appeal.

21 Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah, "This is Not the Path to Paradise," 14 September 2014. http://binbayyah.net/english/fatwa-response-to-isis/.

22 *Marrakesh Declaration*, Marrakesh: January 2016, http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/files/Bismilah-2-ENG.pdf.

Scholars and Ideologues

Analysing how different ideological perspectives draw on religious authority figures.

Recourse to the opinions of previous generations of authoritative scholars is common practice in Islamic thought, providing a means to cement ideas in a broad historical context. In the early Islamic period, this approach may have been employed to provide proximity to the pious early generations of the religion. The tradition has continued as a way of documenting and highlighting the authority that lies behind a particular religious perspective. This traditional form of reference has carried on into the 21st century and is employed to the same effect, as religious clerics, theologians, and ideologues use the opinions and writings of previous generations to substantiate their views.[23]

Questions of religious scholarship might seem alien to countering extremism because of their seemingly academic nature. But recognising where extremist ideologies draw legitimacy and authority

23 W.M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 4.

from is essential to strategies for undermining their appeal. Alongside our analysis of scriptural references in various texts, we analysed the same texts for references to Islamic scholars and ideologues to reveal where different groups that employ scripture derive their authority.[24]

CLASSIFYING SCHOLARS

In categorising scholars, we faced a challenge over the classification of controversial figures such as the Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb and Hizb ut-Tahrir's founder Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, considered by some to be scholars, by others anti-intellectuals. As much as they claim to draw on the Islamic tradition, these figures, influenced by Salafi revivalism and political Islam, often framed their writings around a rejection of scholarship. As such, Islamist and jihadi thought leaders are not included as scholars in our data.

For each category, we distinguished between such modern ideologues, who were foundational figures of ideological movements, and religious scholars, considered orthodox across the Sunni mainstream (see figure 3.1). We excluded Hadith collectors from the list of scholars, because the vast majority of references in the texts analysed were to a specific Hadith collections rather than to the particular scholar.

As well as assessing who was cited, we explored the relative proportion of references to classical scholars in the text compared with references to other historical and contemporary figures. We also analysed the ideological breadth of scholars mentioned. Our results revealed how extremist approaches differed in their treatment of, and aberration from, the Islamic scholarly tradition.

The sheer number of references across categories was notable. The varied scholarly and ideological figures cited reveal the conceptual priorities of each content type. Counter-narrative content makes reference to scholars three times more than Salafi-jihadi documents do, which are instead dominated by jihadi ideologues

_____

24 References to people were both positive and negative, and while the software did allow for some analysis of sentiment towards entities, comprehensively mapping attitudes towards individuals was not possible in the research. However, qualitative investigation indicated that the citing of scholars was far more common than condemnations of them, across the texts.

FIG. 3.1 References to Scholars and Ideologues in Different Content Types

Per cent of all individuals referenced
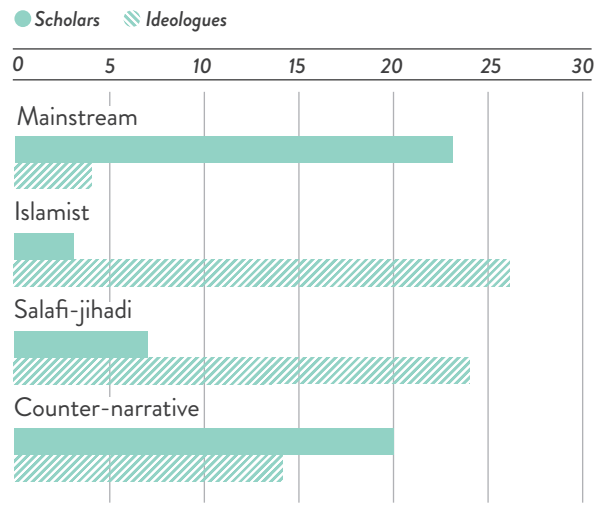
when seeking to authorise arguments. Scholars are mentioned an average of five times per document in counter-narratives, but on average only twice in the Salafi-jihadi sample. Islamist texts rely considerably less on classical scholars than both of these categories do, instead drawing on the authority of modern Islamist ideologues. However, where scholars are cited, there is considerable overlap between these figures and those in the Salafi-jihadi content.

A SPECTRUM OF SCHOLARS

Our sample of mainstream content acted as a control group and provided an example of the breadth of scholarship drawn on across different texts. The mainstream sample has the highest proportion of scholars, indicating that a considerable representation of scholarship is a default and the extremists' relative rejection of it is unorthodox.

In contrast to the Salafi-jihadi content, there are no contemporary figures, either scholars or nonscholars, in the top results for mainstream texts, which instead rely on classical scholars. The founders of all four *madhabs*, the major schools of thought in Sunni jurisprudence, appear in the top 50 mainstream results: Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Abu Hanifa, al-Shafii, and Malik bin Anas, reflecting the attention to historic consultation and scholarly debate within mainstream literature.

Islamist and Salafi-Jihadi Approaches

Islamist content draws on a much narrower spread of figures than the mainstream does. None of the founders of the *madhabs* is present in the top Islamist results. Instead, the list of people in the Islamist content is dominated by 19th- and 20th-century Islamist ideologues such as Hasan al-Banna and Syed Qutb, leading figures in the Muslim Brotherhood; Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, the founder of Hizb ut-Tahrir; and Abul Ala Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami (see table 3.2). These individuals also feature heavily across the Islamist texts, making up 80 per cent of the references to scholars and ideologues. Between them, they are referenced an average of eight times per document, indicating their importance to the content.

TABLE 3.2 Most Referenced Scholars and Ideologues in Islamist Content

● *Nonscholars*   ● *Scholars*

1	Sayyid Qutb, leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood
2	Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, founder of Hizb ut-Tahrir
3	Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood
4	Mohammad Abduh, Islamic scholar and reformer
5	Mohammad Iqbal, Muslim philosopher and scholar

Salafi-jihadi texts, meanwhile, almost completely reject scholarship. Of the 10 most referenced figures in Salafi-jihadi texts, only one is a scholar. The rest are politicians, jihadi leaders, early caliphs, and Hadith collectors. The Salafi-jihadi list navigates between the Prophet's earliest companions and contemporary leaders, both of countries and of jihadi groups (see table 3.3). Salafi-jihadi content frames the battles of today in terms of the battles of earliest Islam, with little mention of Islamic figures since. The relatively contemporary focus on authoritative figures, compared with the mainstream, resonates with our finding that extremists are conceptually more 'modern' than 'medieval' in their worldview. The Salafi-jihadi movement's preoccupation with the West as an aggressor against Islam trumps its recourse to Islam's own intellectual history. This is witnessed in our data, as former US President Barack Obama is the second

most referenced individual in Salafi-jihadi texts, ahead of former al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

TABLE 3.3 Most Referenced Scholars and Ideologues in Salafi-Jihadi Content

● *Nonscholars*   ● *Scholars*

1	Omar ibn Khattab, second caliph after death of Mohammad
2	Barack Obama, former US president
3	Osama bin Laden, former leader of al-Qaeda
4	Adam Yahya Gadhan, former al-Qaeda spokesman
5	Abu Bakr, first caliph after death of Mohammad
6	Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda leader
7	Muslim, Hadith collector
8	Al-Bukhari, Hadith collector
9	Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, former leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq
10	Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, founder of the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence

The most referenced individual in the Salafi-jihadi material, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, is considered by the Islamic mainstream to be a scholar. He founded the Hanbali school of jurisprudence and assembled a prominent collection of Hadith. Hanbali is the closest *madhab* to Wahhabism intellectually, although Wahhabis and Salafis reject the concept of *madhab* as religious innovation. Ibn Taymiyyah, the 13th-century Hanbali reformer, was the 11th result, mentioned in 67 per cent of the Salafi-jihadi documents.

The lack of scholars in the Salafi-jihadi sample should not be a surprise. The puritanical bent of Salafi-jihadism means that religious scholarship is often dismissed as religious innovation, with a focus instead on returning to the perceived Islam of the time of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions (the *Salaf*). Despite this, the movement draws on certain areas of Islamic scholarship that it deems to affirm its religious legitimacy, and groups are content to quote religious authorities when it suits their ideological agendas.[25]

---

25 El-Badawy, Comerford, and Welby, *Inside the Jihadi Mind*, 52.

When it does reference scholars, Salafi-jihadi material, like Islamist content, draws heavily on its own ideological well to garner intellectual support for its approach, rather than having recourse to a broad selection of scholarship. Twice as many jihadi ideologues are mentioned as Islamic scholars. Twenty-four per cent of the most referenced people in the Salafi-jihadi sample are jihadi ideologues, including former Taliban leader Mullah Omar; Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, the spiritual mentor of al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; and Jordanian cleric Abu Qatada al-Filistini. Notably, in the ISIS content, many references condemned these jihadi figures for their rejection of their so-called caliphate on theological grounds.

Countering Extremists With Scholars

The scholars and ideologues who populate the counter-narrative sample are more diverse than those in the Islamist and Salafi-jihadi texts. They include classical theologians, reformers, puritans, and heads of intellectual movements. This breadth reflects the findings in our scriptural analysis – that counter-narrative approaches largely tend to adopt three distinct postures towards scholars and ideologues: using them to condemn, to offer an alternative to extremism, or to quote scholars to take on an extremist interpretation of their arguments. This results in prominent references to figures as diverse as leading Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, early Quranic scholar Abd Allah ibn Abbas, founder of Wahhabism Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and 13th-century Cordoban scholar Imam Abu Abdullah al-Qurtubi.

Across the top 50 counter-narrative results, 20 per cent of the references to people are to mainstream scholars, almost triple the proportion of references to scholars in the Salafi-jihadi sample (seven per cent). Among the nonscholars, jihadi ideologues are prominent in the counter-narrative category, as such texts attempt to explicitly discredit the arguments of leading jihadi figures such as Anwar al-Awlaki, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden, and Abdullah Azzam, with almost three references to these figures per document analysed.

Understanding how scholars are used differently across such content allowed for a more comprehensive

mapping of the key figures, and accompanying perspectives, of each ideological stance. Mainstream approaches apply a broad range of religious authorities to affirm an argument, whereas extremists tend to quote their own. They make only occasional reference to the rich tradition of scholarship within Islamic history, bolstering their points of view with carefully selected references.

Extremists frequently cite ideologues like Anwar al-Awlaki and theologians such as Ibn Taymiyyah, who play a central role in the ideology of contemporary jihadism. Understanding the authority and emphasis that extremists place on such figures, and their relative absence in mainstream religious interpretations, is essential for policy responses that address the root causes, not just the symptoms, of extremist violence.

■

Case Study
IBN TAYMIYYAH IN EXTREME AND MAINSTREAM TEXTS

The 13th-century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, often criticised for articulating a criterion of apostasy that jihadis claim permits violence against other Muslims, plays a controversial role in the Islamic intellectual cannon. We found him prominently cited not only in Salafi-jihadi and Islamist content but also throughout the counter-narratives, so we unpacked how a single scholar's work can be used to affirm apparently contradictory ideological positions.

Ibn Taymiyyah's writing is largely geared towards the establishment of appropriate religious responses to unjust rulers, the dangers of abandoning Islamic law, and the addressing of theological dissent.

Despite Salafi-jihadism's aversion to scholarship, Ibn Taymiyyah was one of the most referenced scholars in this category, quoted on average once in every three documents analysed. In such material, Ibn Taymiyyah is cited to affirm the unity of Muslims, as he stresses that unity is the path of strength, victory, and empowerment, and division the path of failure. One text referred to him in relation to the goals and rules of engagement in violent jihad, including the permissibility of suicide bombing, and attacking non-Muslims, described with derogatory epithets such as "people of the abode of war" and "polytheists."

ISIS' French-language magazine *Dar al-Islam* quotes Ibn Taymiyyah to justify fighting the enemies of Islam, who fail to pay the zakat tax, a form of alms giving:

> *The companions and the imams after them agreed on fighting those who refused to pay the zakat, even if they were performing the five prayers and fasting the month of Ramadan.*

Ibn Taymiyyah was also prominent in the Islamist list. A text from Egyptian Islamist group al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah, in which it distances itself from the ideology of al-Qaeda, cites Ibn Taymiyyah to affirm the importance of distinguishing between civilians and combatants in jihad:

> *As for those who are not capable of fighting … like women, children, [Christian] monks, the elderly, the blind, and those like them: Most religious scholars say that they should not be killed unless they fight, in word or in deed.*[26]

An expert on Ibn Taymiyyah, Yahya Michot of Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, suggests that "[ISIS'] own favourite scholar can be turned against it" as a means of dissuading hard-line ideologues from carrying out acts of extremist violence.[27] Michot argues that while ISIS quotes Ibn Taymiyyah widely, the group misunderstands the subtlety of the scholar's analysis.

Michot suggests equipping prison libraries with Ibn Taymiyyah texts, as well as making Arabic compulsory for Muslim prisoners, to prevent prison radicalisation. At a recent conference, scholars corrected a misprint in an Ibn Taymiyyah fatwa, which jihadis had used to justify fighting unbelievers in non-Muslims lands.[28] Similar scholarship could be used to turn Ibn Taymiyyah's writings against extremists.

■

---

26 Issam Al-Din Darablah, *Islam and the Laws of War*, 2006, accessed online at: http://bit.ly/2vD5dlH.

27 Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* (London: Penguin Random House, 2016), 239–242.

28 Hassan Hassan, "A religious basis for violence misreads original principles," *The National*, 9 April 2012, https://www.thenational.ae/a-religious-basis-for-violence-misreads-original-principles-1.391065.

Tafsir

Comparing classical and modern commentary on the Quran.

Underpinning this research have been complex questions of religious interpretation, authority, and justification for theological perspectives. Islam's 1,400-year history is characterised by a rich tradition of grappling with such issues. In particular, the wide array of *tafsir* (plural *tafasir*), comprehensive commentary and interpretation of the Quran, demonstrates this scholarly focus by offering diverse views on the interpretation of verses and explaining important context not included in the Quran.

We applied the methodology used in the earlier parts of our research to a broad sample of *tafsir* to demonstrate the scale of interpretational differences that can arise from identical source texts. This helps to shed light on how the Quran can be used to affirm different ideological positions.

To do this, we used a conceptual analysis of four Sunni *tafasir*, two classical and two Islamist. We chose *tafsir* on 50 chapters of the Quran, the most prominently referenced across our sample of documents. As each *tafsir* looks at the same verses, we were not exploring scriptural references but rather the thematic emphasis of the text. This allowed us to comparatively analyse the differing ideas and the extent of conceptual diversity borne out by different interpretations of identical Quranic texts. In particular, we explored how a classical approach to *tafsir* is distinct from more recent Islamist projects, as well as their relative conceptual proximity to Salafi-jihadi texts, to further unpack the ideological gulf between extremism and the mainstream.

THE TEXTS

The two classical *tafasir* selected were *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (*Tafsir* of the Two Jalals) and the *Tanwir al-Miqbas*, attributed to Ibn Abbas. The authority and mainstream nature of both works are suggested by their availability on the website of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan, which frames its mission as "calling for middle ground, moderation and tolerance" and "rectifying unsound ideas and misconceptions about Islam."[29]

Jalalayn, believed to be written in 1459 AD, is a single-volume *tafsir*, popular for its simplicity and concision, written by two men named Jalal, master and student. *Tanwir al-Miqbas* has been attributed both to the Prophet's companion Abdullah ibn Abbas and to Mohammad ibn Yaqub al-Firuzabadi. Despite its uncertain origins, it is valued for its insight into early exegesis and the development of the *tafsir* genre.

The two Islamist texts analysed were Maududi's *Tafhim-ul-Quran* (The Meaning of the Quran) and Qutb's *Fi Zilal al-Quran* (In the Shade of the Quran), both seminal in developing a religious basis for the authors' respective Islamist political movements, Jamaat-e-Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood. Modern interpretations are more thematically wide-ranging and less rooted in the text than classical *tafsir*. This might in part explain the variances in conceptual content regarding specific chapters.

The Pakistani founder of the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami, Maududi wrote *Tafhim-ul-Quran* in 1972 as a guide to taking the Quran "at face value" as a "socio-religious institution."[30] This *tafsir* includes both orthodox and modern interpretations, combining a traditional commentary on the Quran with the author's rationale and discussions on economics, history, sociology, and politics. Qutb wrote *Fi Zilal al-Quran* in prison in 1955 after his involvement in the attempted assassination of the then Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954. It articulates the vision of an Islamic state and society that Qutb would popularise among Islamists.

---

29 The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, http://aalal-bayt.org/en/index.html.

30 Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

These four distinct founding histories are reflected in their separate approach to, and interpretation of, the same 50 chapters of the Quran.

■

Explainer
ISLAMIST INTERPRETATIONS

In 1941, Abul Ala Maududi founded Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamic political organisation. Maududi created the party to influence the leadership of the Muslim community and create an Islamic state in postcolonial India. He believed politics was "an integral, inseparable part of the Islamic faith." The group split into two separate organisations in India and Pakistan following the Partition of India in 1947. Other groups inspired by the same ideology then developed in neighbouring countries and are still active today.

Sayyid Qutb was a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s in Egypt. The Brotherhood was founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928 as an Islamist political and social movement. Qutb authored 24 books, including writings on the social and political role of Islam, most famously *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Milestones). His writings helped shape the stance of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has since become a transnational Islamist organisation.

■

OVERVIEW OF *TAFSIR*

The top 10 conceptual results for each *tafsir* have considerable crossover, unsurprising because they are rooted in a single-text source. However, there are a number of significant variances that speak to the specific focuses of each author and their ideological stances.

'Worship' is the most referenced concept in all four *tafasir* except that of Qutb, where it appears fourth. On average, it is referenced 16 times in each *tafsir*. The emphasis on worship and rejecting polytheism is perhaps expected in *tafsir*, as these are major focuses of certain parts of the Quran.

The afterlife's importance is evident across the different *tafasir*, constituting 32 per cent of the top

10 conceptual references, with 6,557 references in total. All four *tafasir* also emphasise the interaction between acts in the temporal world and the eternal. Meanwhile, judgement day, resurrection of the dead, and punishment all appear in the top 10 concepts of all but one of the samples.

In *Jalalayn* and *Tanwir al-Miqbas*, the two classical *tafasir*, four of the 10 most frequently occurring concepts pertain to the afterlife, while in Qutb's *Fi Zilal al-Quran* and Maududi's *Tafhim-ul-Quran*, it accounts for three of the top 10 results. Together, concepts regarding to the afterlife form 32 per cent of the most prominent conceptual references across the *tafasir* (6,557 of 20,631 references).

The most frequently occurring conceptual references in Qutb's Islamist commentary are the most distinct of the four, with five of the top 10 concepts not appearing in the top results of any other *tafsir*. Content regarding non-Muslims, the community of believers, and treason against them, as well as proselytisation and preaching, are distinct to the top results of this *tafsir*. *Tanwir al-Miqbas*, meanwhile, shares nine of the top 10 concepts with at least one other *tafsir*, with the 'people of Mecca' as the only unique top result.

Despite variances among the *tafasir*, the concepts alluded to generally are much more spiritual or focused on religious practice than the concepts identified in the ideological texts examined earlier in this report. This is perhaps because they are by definition more rooted in the breadth of the Quran and its thematic focuses. In other words, by their more comprehensive nature, they cherry-pick less in their discussion of concepts.

This is particularly clear in the case of the concepts of jihadism and an Islamic state. There is relatively little mention of these concepts in all *tafasir* compared with the documents analysed earlier in this report. For example, 'jihad' topped references in the counter-narrative, Islamist, and Salafi-jihadi categories but was not present in the top 10 for any of the *tafasir*. Even according to Islamist interpretations of the Quran, religiously sanctioned violence is not a mainstream concept.

In the Salafi-jihadi content, 86 per cent of concepts were identified as pertaining explicitly to religious violence or to a radical interpretation of a mainstream religious concept. Meanwhile, in Qutb's *Fi Zilal al-Quran*, which is closest conceptually to Salafi-jihadi content, only 38 per cent of the main concepts could be conceivably interpreted as such.

COMPARISON WITH SALAFI-JIHADI CONTENT

If Islamist extremism is rooted in the Quran, then one might expect to find comparable themes in extremist content and *tafsir*. Our findings show major thematic distinctions. Analysing the ideas contained in different *tafasir* allowed us to compare them with the dominant concepts in the different categories of ideological content analysed elsewhere in this report. Of particular interest was to map the crossover in concepts between the Salafi-jihadi content and different Quranic interpretations, revealing which has most (and least) in common with extremist material.

The concepts in Salafi-jihadi documents show significantly greater similarity with the two Islamist *tafasir* than with the two classical interpretations (see figure 4.1). The 38 per cent of concepts that the Salafi-jihadi sample has in common with both the classical *tafasir* are largely non-extreme, such as fasting, prayers, the Prophet's tribe, and the global Muslim community (ummah).

FIG. 4.1 Conceptual Crossover Between Salafi-Jihadism and *Tafsir*

Per cent of Salafi-jihadi concepts shared with tafsir
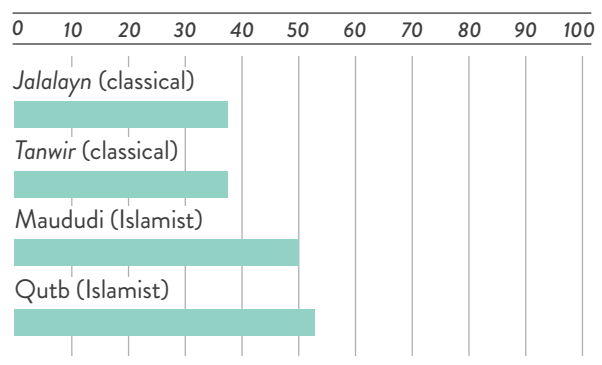
Both Islamist *tafasir*, meanwhile, have at least half of their top 50 concepts in common with Salafi-jihadi ideas. Qutb's *tafsir* has 52 per cent crossover, including concepts such as military jihad, polytheism, and fitna. Concepts such as an Islamic state, non-Muslims, the *jizyah* tax, sharia law, and the spoils of war contribute to the 50 per cent of prominent concepts in Maududi's *tafsir* that are in common with Salafi-jihadism.

While many label the ideas of groups such as ISIS as medieval, their rhetoric and intellectual armoury have considerably more in common with modernist Islamist thinkers than with classical scholars of Islam. This is significant for policymakers and those engaged in countering extremist narratives, as it demonstrates the importance of empowering a confident religious response to Islamism that sees Islam as an ally rather than an irrelevance.

◼

Case Study
VARYING VIEWS ON JEWS AND NON-MUSLIMS

Across the *tafasir*, there is a disparity in references to Jews and interpretations of how they should be treated, indicating different views on religious minorities within mainstream and extremist approaches.

Judaism is of greater concern in the Islamist *tafasir* than in the classical ones. Within the sections analysed, Maududi has 380 references to the Israelites, Qutb has 90, and there were none in either *Jalalayn* or *Tanwir*, the two classical *tafasir*. While this may be because of the presence of a proximate Jewish state at the time of writing, it reveals the disproportionate emphasis Islamists place on the religious 'other' and their treatment in an Islamic society.

More generally, of all four *tafasir,* Qutb places the most focus on non-Muslims more broadly, with 1,189 individual mentions, forming nine per cent of the top 50 references. In contrast, the same concept accounts for lower proportions of the other scholars' top 50 mentions (see figure 4.2).

Qutb's commentary reveals how Islamists cherry-pick examples of division between Jews and Muslims throughout history to justify contemporary religious violence. Periods of peaceful co-existence, however, are not drawn on in the text. Qutb's commentary on *Surat al-Maidah* (The Table Spread chapter) depicts Jews as wicked religious opponents, scheming against Islam since its first day in Medina:

The war the Jews began to wage against Islam and Muslims in those early days has raged on to the present. The form and appearance

FIG. 4.2 Concepts Relating to Non-Muslims in *Tafsir*
Per cent of total concepts
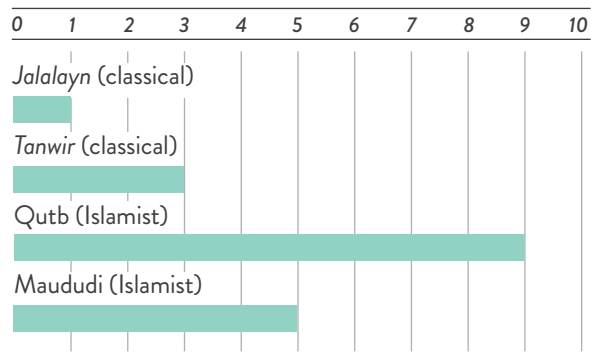
may have changed, but the nature and means remains the same.[31]

Islamist extremists paint conflict as inevitable through a distorted portrayal of history and scripture. The division between Jews and Muslims is framed as a historical battle, intractable and eternal. However, omission of scripture that is favourable towards Jews, and marginalisation of historic periods of co-existence, leads to a narrow and misrepresentative understanding of the interaction of Jews and Muslims.

This attitude towards Jews and non-Muslims is not limited to the Islamist *tafsir*. In our wider sample of documents, Salafi-jihadi content displays similar attitudes towards non-Muslims and reflects considerably more on how to engage with them than the mainstream texts do. An al-Qaeda document presents an argument for jihad against non-Muslims, sanctioning their killing and taking the spoils of war. The fight is justified through portraying it as a defensive jihad to eliminate fitna (unrest), and to Islamise the entire world.

As for the mainstream, while it focuses on Jews less, when it does, texts tend to offer a view that promotes peaceful co-existence.

Although the Islamist and Salafi-jihadi stances are distinct, once again, their similar ideological positions in contrast to the mainstream are revealed through their views on non-Muslims and how to treat them.

---

31 Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Quran*, al-Maidah, https://tafsirzilal.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/al-maidah-eng.pdf.

Conclusion

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.[32] 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.

There is also considerable scope for religious scholars and those involved in countering extremist ideas to unpack our findings further. Our study explored only Sunni extremism and mainstream. This was in large part due to the accessibility of comparative content, as well as the focus of the global debate. The same methodology could be adapted for a study on other religious or political extremisms that purport to act in the name of a wider group but is rejected by the majority.

---

32 Gehad el-Haddad, "I Am a Member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Not a Terrorist," *New York Times*, 22 February 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/opinion/i-am-a-member-of-the-muslim-brotherhood-not-a-terrorist.html.

Appendices

Appendix

Methodology

This report comprises a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of 3,151 religiously rooted documents from across the spectrum of the Islamic corpus, ranging from a wide selection of mainstream Islamic scholarship to Islamist and Salafi-jihadi texts, as well as efforts to counter these extreme narratives.

Analysis software identified discrete religious and ideological concepts in the texts. Additionally, using natural language processing, these texts were scanned for their use of religious scripture (the Quran and Hadith) and scholarship. This allowed for a comparative analysis of different elements of the religious content of subsets of the sample. This was supplemented by a qualitative stage of analysis, including case studies and specific thematic queries.

Religious content does not naturally lend itself to quantitative or automated analysis. However, this novel approach allows for a multifaceted examination of the research question: unpacking the religious content of extremist truth claims, to expose their variance from, or perversion of, the mainstream.

SOFTWARE

Setting out on this research, we wanted to combine an expertise in qualitative and quantitative insight into Islamist extremist ideologies with innovative technological approaches that allowed for the processing of large amounts of material. Our analysis was aided by use of IntuScan™, a platform produced by IntuView, an organisation providing semantic analytic solutions for texts, combining cutting-edge ontology-based technology with document exploitation, including sentiment analysis, entity extraction, name matching, and idea mining in a variety of languages.

IntuScan enables the user to analyse large quantities of documents, prioritise them, and obtain immediate abstracts of their content and interpretations of cultural-religious references. The software allows the user to identify texts' authorship, political leanings, ideas, and sentiments, as well as to extract both explicit and implied information deriving from the context.

IntuScan analyses text using a natural language processing engine to uncover language-independent concepts that are defined in an ontology for various domains. The software uses sophisticated linguistic tools to identify complex expressions and resolve ambiguous expressions according to their context. IntuScan can detect different spellings and renderings of names and terms, although before analysis, results were manually checked for any duplication that may have slipped through.

In deriving meaning from documents, the software denotes a document as Islamist, Salafi-jihadi, or mainstream. This is done by scanning documents for a number of indicative ideological attributes. For example, a document's Salafi-jihadi outlook might be evidenced by references such as:

- determining that the fate of infidels or apostate Muslims will be conversion to Islam, eternal hellfire, punishment, and divine retribution;
- referring to 'martyrdom' or the permissibility of suicide terrorism;
- demonstrating extremist attitudes regarding relations with non-Muslims, such as a prohibition on befriending infidels, dhimmitude, and imposing the *jizyah* head tax;
- characterising non-Muslim countries as infidel nations and the 'abode of war,' as opposed to Muslim lands, which are viewed as the 'abode of Islam.'

Meanwhile, a document would be recognised as projecting a nonviolent interpretation for features such as:

- presenting arguments for a moderate perspective on the concept of jihad by branding Muslims who perform acts of terror as 'misguided';
- referring to non-Muslims as 'people of the book' as well as advocating peace and economic ties with non-Muslims;
- referring to verses of the Quran and Hadith that are interpreted by moderates as signifying religious tolerance.

Such criteria underpin the natural language processing and idea-mining features used to aid analysis throughout the report. Spot checks of content were used to confirm the accuracy of such classifications.

RESEARCH MATERIAL

In the course of our research, we drew on a sample of over 3,000 documents, with smaller segments used for specific items of comparative analysis. Most of our research was based on a sample of 300 manually collated sources, spanning a range of content – Islamist, Salafi-jihadi, and counter-narrative – in Arabic, English, and French, the languages available to the researchers.

These documents, which formed the core of our qualitative analysis, were mainly from online sources, and each document was a maximum of 30 pages to aid natural language processing. The choice of documents was designed to capture as broad as possible a span of content within each category, as follows:

Mainstream documents included fatwas, communiqués (*bayanat*), essays, and biographies from a range of orthodox Sunni sources. Selecting a range of documents that captures the religious mainstream was a challenge given the essential breadth of this category. This was compounded by the difficulty of defining orthodoxy in any religious tradition, but particularly in Sunni Islam, which is characterised by largely decentralised religious authority. Drawing on a range of religious documents allowed us to create a useful control group to contrast with a much more ideologically cohesive corpus of extremist texts.

Islamist texts were taken from the mission statements and documentation of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Hizb ut-Tahrir, as well as writings by founding Islamist ideologues, such as Qutb and al-Banna.

Salafi-jihadi sources derived from the output of a number of groups, including ISIS and various al-Qaeda affiliates, and were taken from magazines such as *Dabiq, Rumiyah*, and *Inspire,* texts from jihadi ideologues like Anwar al-Awlaki, as well as ISIS textbooks.

Counter-narratives were included that used the Quran or Hadith to reject extremist arguments. We drew on a range of theological approaches to countering extremism, including the UAE-based Hedayah's counter-narrative library and fatwas from Egypt's al-Azhar University.

ANALYSIS

A series of comparative research questions were applied to the document categories above. Analytical queries were conducted largely on data sets downloaded into Excel format, focusing mainly on the top 50 results for each query, although the IntuScan online platform was also used for some broader analysis.

Scripture: Software established the 50 most referenced verses (both Quran and Hadith) in each category. In the report, we have used the Saudi Sahih International translation of the Quran into English. The software drew out only the main Hadith collectors – *Kutub al-Sittah* (The Six Books) – considered by most Sunni Muslims to be canonical. Manual subcoding took place of counter-narrative content to ascertain whether scripture was being used to directly take on extremists' use of the Quran, provide an alternative to extremist arguments, or condemn extremists as un-Islamic.

Scholars: After removing duplicate names, we classified the top 50 most referenced people for each category as either scholars or nonscholars to see the weighting placed on scholarship per category.

Scholars were Islamic figures primarily known for their theological writings and accepted as authoritative within the Islamic cannon. Scholars primarily renowned for their Hadith collection were coded as nonscholars, as the vast majority of references were in the context of quotation of Hadith verses, rather than items of scholarship. Modern reformist ideologues were also distinguished from mainstream scholars in the sample. Further analytical enquiries subcategorised the ideological outlooks of certain scholars and the types of nonscholars mentioned across different categories, for example world leaders.

Concepts: The vagueness of the term 'concepts' was a potential limitation on meaningful analysis. To draw out salient concepts from the sample, we therefore searched IntuScan specifically for expressions of moderate, reformist, and extremist religious perspectives. We next filtered the results to remove remaining references to people, holy names, objects, locations, and historical events to end up with theological references to other religious groups and ideological conceptions of core principles. Analysis focused on the top 50 most referenced concepts in each category, and subcoding occurred on Salafi-jihadi and mainstream to identify concepts that could be deemed 'extremist' or 'military.'

Tafsir: Four *tafasir* (interpretations of the Quran) were analysed for the final section of the report. Two were classical, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* and *Tanwir al-Miqbas*, while two were Islamist, Maududi's *Tafhim-ul-Quran* and Qutb's *Fi Zilal al-Quran*. These texts were downloaded from online sources to aid linguistic analysis, including Jordan's Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute. The sections of *tafsir* selected for analysis were guided by the 50 most prominently quoted Quranic verses from across the rest of our sample, ensuring there was a strong comparative element to the content examined.

Although most of the data set categories were broadly equal in number, we established a consistent metric across the sample – the number of references per document to scripture, scholars, or concepts – to make the categories directly comparable. As well as exploring the relative weighting of references per document, for each segment of analysis we looked at the variety and crossover between category types and explored the breadth and depth of quotation to map whether references were broad or narrow in their recourse to religious authority or ideas.

CAVEATS

This research is intended as a pilot attempt to map quantitatively the distinctions between Islamist extremism and the Islamic mainstream. There are a number of potential changes to scope and scale, which could be built into future analysis.

The software constituted a very useful tool, but no computer can provide 100 per cent analytical certainty when compared with expert examination, particularly on content as subjective and precise as religious discourse. In the course of the research, we used natural language processing software primarily as a tool for automating collection and classification, applying reasonable levels of checks to these processes, while analysis was done manually. Another study might have made greater or lesser use of technology to achieve greater breadth or control respectively. The language-processing ability of the software also meant that our analysis did not include nontext materials, including videos, songs, or pictures. An analysis of these media would likely provide broader comparative insights.

Appendix

About Us

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change aims to help make globalisation work for the many, not the few. We do this by helping countries, their people, and their governments address some of the most difficult challenges in the world today.

We work to promote co-existence and counter extremism by tackling the ideology behind violence, not just violence itself. We work with governments and leaders of fragile, developing, and emerging states to enhance their effectiveness. We work to support increased stability and understanding in the Middle East. And we work to revitalise the centre ground of politics and equip today's leaders to combat the rise of false populism.

Our Co-existence work identifies defeating the threat of extremist ideology and violence as a long-term and multidimensional challenge. To prevent extremism, it is essential to address the problem before it becomes violent and recognise that violence is symptomatic of an underlying way of thinking.

Our research and programme delivery have shown that extremism prospers when ideology and the role of religion in society are not properly considered, or are ignored. Extremism also thrives where there is a leadership vacuum, where civil society is weak or blocked, where there is a lack of participation in state institutions by local communities, or where there is a lack of trust between the state and citizens.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Milo Comerford is an analyst and research innovation officer in the Co-existence team at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. His research focuses on jihadi ideology and propaganda, and he has co-authored major policy reports including *Inside the Jihadi Mind*, which explored the common ideology of three leading jihadi groups, and *Milestones to Militancy*, which analysed a sample of 100 prominent jihadis. Milo has worked with governments and international organisations on building effective strategies for countering extremism.

Milo's research and expertise have been featured on outlets including Sky News, BBC, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Al Jazeera*, the *Sunday Times*, and CNN, and he has written for the *New Statesman*, the *Independent*, the *Spectator*, and *Newsweek*. He holds a BA (Hons) in philosophy and theology from the University of Oxford and previously worked on a global education programme, building open-mindedness and resilience to extremism in young people across 30 countries.

Rachel Bryson is a researcher in the Co-existence team at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. She analyses global religious extremism, predominantly focusing on Africa and the Middle East. She researches gender and youth in extremist groups as well as the extreme ideologies behind Islamist movements. She recently wrote the report *For Caliph and Country*, which examined the lives of 131 men and women who have shaped or been shaped by the British jihadi scene.

Rachel regularly comments on these issues in the media, including the BBC, Sky News, the *Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, the *National*, and the *Independent*, and advises policymakers and thought leaders. She grew up in East Africa, holds an MA (Hons) in Arabic and French from the University of Edinburgh, and has worked at several leading counter-extremism think tanks.

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 rather 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.

Making use of innovative natural language processing approaches, this study of over 3,000 mainstream, Islamist, Salafi-jihadi, and counter-narrative texts forms a quantitative picture of the key ideological differences between Islamist extremism, both violent and nonviolent, and the Islamic mainstream. Our conclusions can provide a basis for an informed response by religious leaders, policymakers, and civil-society organisations, rooted in the significant differences between Islamist extremism and mainstream Islam identified by our analysis.