

## Countering the Third Wave of Radicalization

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### 1. Introduction

A common-sense view of radicalization, shorn of any particular religion, is a “process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations that either 1) reject or undermine the status quo or 2) reject or undermine contemporary ideas and expressions of freedom of choice”.<sup>1</sup>

Western understanding, particularly in media, often gives the impression that the embattled and occasionally violent form of religiosity known as ‘fundamentalism’<sup>2</sup> is purely an Islāmic phenomenon. This is not necessarily the case. Fundamentalism is a global fact and has come to the fore in almost every major faith.<sup>3</sup> This is so because of the manner in which religious injunction has been interpreted by its practitioners. Indeed, the believers themselves are so variegated that there *just* cannot be one single interpretation of a religion or a religious text.<sup>4</sup> In other words, there is adequate clarity that a socio-political or religious paradigm is heir to a multiplicity of interpretations. Such a construal ignores the significance of other ways in which people view themselves, including class, gender, morals or politics, denying the real possibilities of reasoned choices.<sup>5</sup> This is so notwithstanding the fact that the quintessence of an archetypal representation is, as a rule, ironclad.

As a matter of fact, the oddity that expresses itself in the manifoldness of array in exegesis – if neuro-science is to be invoked – may only be attributed to the manner in which any sentient being perceives a particular feature outside itself. To that end, no two discernments can be said to possess exactly an identical view.

<sup>1</sup> Akimi Scarcella, Ruairi Page and Vivek Furtado, “Terrorism, Radicalization, Extremism, Authoritarianism and Fundamentalism: A Systematic Review of the Quality and Psychometric Properties of Assessments”, in *PLoS ONE*, 2016, vol. 11, no. 12, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> The author is using the two words ‘radicalization’ and ‘fundamentalism’ interchangeably in this policy brief because it will permit ease of both understanding and examination. However, there are several important distinctions between the two words. Fundamentalism is a rigid belief in the literal, unchanging truth of sacred texts or core foundational doctrines. Radicalization, on the other hand, is an active, dynamic process of adopting increasingly extreme social, political or religious ideas that reject the existing system or status quo, which can sometimes lead to supporting or using violence.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, Modern Library, New York, 2002, p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> See Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, Penguin Books, London, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Therefore, the experience of subject ‘x’ – despite the fact that she tastes, *ceteris paribus*, the same flavour – would at least be minimally different from that of subject ‘y’. If sapient architecture is innately built on lines that have been described above and principally about aspects that have a bearing on day-to-day existence, then it is no gainsaying that there would quite obviously be not only misinterpretations in socio-political and religious thought, but confusion and belligerence as well.

This policy brief examines Islām in the context of radicalization. But a brief neuro-scientific description is necessary to capture a concept that I have been advocating for over two decades. Despite hard evidence about the plasticity of the brain and the occurrence of cortical rewiring which takes place as a response to nurture, the fact of the matter is that human beings do not come into the world *tabula rasa*.<sup>6</sup> Nature ascertains that the behavioural patterns fractionate along genetic boundaries. To that end, a person’s mental content is largely in-built, even to the extent that her actions are predisposed. Nurture – especially if it suits the sapient architecture that nature has fashioned – encourages the innateness. However, inheritance – whether or not nurture intervenes in its growth – permits a subject to participate in an attributive manner. Extra-cognitive predispositions too, therefore, cannot be said to be wholly determined by the setting. Although this hypothesis may be accused of being an extension of the Chomskyan “universal innate grammar” theory which describes the extraordinary ability in children to decipher complex concepts from a principally imprecise environment, the fact is that deviant behaviour, too, is spawn of a brain that may careen out of control during the process of encephalization<sup>7</sup> that takes place in the front end of the neural tube in the seventh week of brain development.

It is in this context that the question of radicalization acquires import and warrants examination in a discourse that has religious fanaticism as a subject of study. The fact that this policy brief has started with reference to neuroscience is an attempt to construct a background for a counter-narrative which, in days to come, might find a receptive audience.

### 2. Islām and Radicalization

In all fairness, radicalization that characterizes the present times

<sup>6</sup> A blank slate or the absence of pre-conceived ideas or pre-determined goals.

<sup>7</sup> Encephalization refers to the human brain’s evolution and is marked by a significant increase in the total brain size relative to body size. Increased encephalization is a clear hallmark of human cognitive and cultural evolution.

has been deemed to be – shorn of the apologist’s banner – confined to Islām. Recent events around the world bracket “acts of terror” as (a) those perpetrated by Muslims (b) in the name of and for Da’esh<sup>8</sup> (al-Qaeda, too, has lauded acts of violence that are attributed to Da’esh or Da’esh followers!), (c) confusing states about the real identity of the perpetrators, and (d) even about the motivation for the actions. Almost all the acts of violence may be an express result of the “transformative moment through which Islam is passing”.<sup>9</sup> But despite the simplicity of such an explanation, the new challenge for the so-called ‘urbane’ world necessitates novelty. After all, some of the incidents that have been termed as Islāmist action – with or without Da’esh content – might not be as cut-and-dried as previously thought. The important aspect that must be borne in mind is that until such time as there is motivation to kill and maim, the brain will always guide aggression.

There are five key *madhabs* or schools in Islām. The primary ones are: (a) Hanafi, (b) Shafei, (c) Maliki, (d) Hanbali and (e) Jafari (which is chiefly *Shi’ah*). Indian Muslims are predominantly from the Hanafi sect of Islām. The sect adheres to the school of thought propounded by Imam Abu Hanifa and is considered to be the most liberal of the five Islāmic schools of thought. Although the five schools do not differ in primary matters of doctrine and rituals, the Hanbali sect – which term themselves as Wahabī or Salafī in Saudi Arabia – is the school that advocates the literal interpretation of textual sources. It, therefore, derives its canonical laws or *Shari’ah* primarily from the Qur’ān, the Hadith (the sayings and customs of Prophet Muhammad), and the views of the Prophet’s companions and his followers.

*Shari’ah* classifies every person’s performance in life into five categories. These constitute ones that are (i) obligatory, (ii) recommended, (iii) permitted, (iv) discouraged, and (v) forbidden. Accordingly, life derives its very existence from the clarity with which the path is taken to the watering place. *Shari’ah* epitomizes this ineffaceable concept in Islām.

But as the policy brief has sought to preamble, there would be imperfections in the construal mechanism, for instance, of what may constitute as ‘recommended’ by way of *zakat* or charitable donation by a Muslim. The amount to be donated by way of *zakat* is normally based on the value of every possession that a person has. It is, as a rule, 2.5 per cent of a Muslim’s total savings and wealth above a minimum amount known as *niṣāb*. But interpreters of Islāmic jurisprudence differ on both *niṣāb* and other aspects that pertain to *zakat*, including how such a recommended practice is to be calculated. After all, there is no centralized institution which computes *zakat*. To that end, if there is no emergence of a clear answer from the sacred texts of Islām, the Hanbali school does not accept legal discretion or the customs of the *qum* as a sound basis for the derivation of Islāmic law. This is in contrast to the methodology accepted by Islāmic schools such as Hanafi and Maliki. The Hanbali school, therefore, is the proponent of a strict traditionalist school of jurisprudence in Sunnī Islām. Indeed, it is the Hanbali school that is spearheading the radicalization process in Islām.

This brief description shows that the concept of radicalization is inherent in the Hanbali school and that it is not only the chief sect that drives the actions and motivations of formations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS (although there are members of other sects in both groups). The fact of the matter is that with the ‘entrance’ of both al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (‘AQIS’) and ISIS by way

of the Wilayah al-Hind (‘Guardianship of Hindustan’) into India, there is a possibility of witnessing the radicalization of an important group of Muslims in India.

The phenomenon of radicalization can be attributed to the growing influence of the Hanbali school in the country by way of the resurgence of the Popular Front of India (‘PFI’).<sup>10</sup> Although PFI – whose top leadership were primarily from the Indian state of Kerala – deny the allegation that the organization has any truck with the Hanbali school, the fact is that they have been radicalizing Indian Muslims towards the conservative strain of Islām whatever their denominations.

The Hifazat-e-Islam Bangladesh (‘HIB’) and Islami Andolan Bangladesh (‘IAB’) – Islāmist formations that have re-emerged in current times – are close associates of the PFI. The HIB and IAB are working inside Bangladesh as overground activists of al-Qaeda- and ISIS-affiliated organizations such as Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (‘JMB’) and Ansarullah Bangla Team (‘ABT’). Bowing to immense pressure from the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime apparatus of Bangladesh,<sup>11</sup> both JMB and ABT had curtailed their activity for the present, propping up instead its surrogates by way of HIB and IAB. The stratagem is simple: to instil a sense of complacency in the establishment that JMB and ABT have disappeared. The reality is that they have activated ‘Op Confusion’ in Bangladesh as well as rejuvenated Islāmism in Bangladesh.

Indeed, the timeline of the Islāmist threat is quite simple. The author was able to plot a perceptible timeline during the period of his advanced research in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The study unearthed a “movement of waves” in the *modus operandi* of Islāmist action which incidentally would never cease until the end of time: the “transformative moment” in Islām<sup>12</sup> is going to be never-ending.

In fact, the manner in which the United States-led coalition has sought to de-territorialize ISIS from the area has ascertained that the ‘war against the infidels’ would now not only be a ceaseless one, but an accelerated course of action. The ouster of ISIS from places such as Raqqa has not only emboldened their resolve about the Islāmist apocalyptic expectations about “black banners that will come from the east”,<sup>13</sup> but also about the Islāmist belief that the establishment of *Nizam-e-Mustafa* throughout the world is a certainty. If Sun Tzu, Kautilya and Clausewitz were to have paraphrased their premises on ‘art of war’, then the master strategists would have certainly emphasized the importance of waves after a period of lull.

A deliberate interlude or a tactical retreat is a time-tested stratagem of war. The author is reminded of *A German General on the Eastern Front: The Letters and Diaries of Gotthard Heinrici, 1941–1942* by Johannes Hürter. It makes interesting reading in the context of this brief and merits a passage at this juncture:

General Heinrici was a master of tactical retreat. The

<sup>10</sup> The PFI was banned by the Government of India on 28 September 2022. See Jaideep Saikia, “Popular Front of India: A clear and present danger to the nation’s security”, *Firstpost*, 10 June 2022. The article was written three months before the outfit was finally banned.

<sup>11</sup> During the Awami League government, 2009–2024.

<sup>12</sup> El Fadl, 2006, see *supra* note 9.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase “black banners that will come from the east” (often translated as the *Hadith of the Black Flags*) refers to a powerful body of Islāmic apocalyptic prophecies. It predicts that at the end of time, a religious army bearing black flags will emerge from the historical region of Khurasan (an area encompassing parts of modern-day Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia) to pave the way for the Mahdi, a messianic savior figure in Islāmic theology.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Da’esh’ is fundamentally an Arabic short form of the opening letters of the Islamic State’s previous name in Arabic, that is, *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wal al-Sham* or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (‘ISIS’).

<sup>9</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2006, pp. 5–6.

German general would attack the Russians and craft a gain and halt when his attack ran out of steam. He would swiftly construct a fake fortification on the freshly attained forward positions in order to create a ruse. Heinrich would then instantly pullback his forces five to six miles to a pre-determined line of defence. The next morning the Russians would unleash an artillery barrage on the fake German front line, and deploy numerous divisions after the cessation of the artillery barrage. The ruse worked and the Russians on reaching the ‘fake front line’ – with no one there – would run out of steam. At the same time Heinrich would be closely surveying the Russian artillery barrage and then send his army forward toward the exhausted Russians and stage a counter attack, often attaining a victory. The general used this tactic repeatedly. The Russians apparently never quite figured out how he succeeded in duping them.

The point that is being made is that although ISIS has experienced territorial defeat, it has been able to confuse the enemy with its continual subterfuges, turning disadvantage into advantages. Both al-Qaeda and ISIS have once again joined forces (they were always, according to the author, one and the same despite what some short-sighted observers seem to have surmised). It is incumbent upon the enemy to fathom their presence among a population that has become even more resolute, the determination emanating from (a) the spectacular successes that had been achieved by al-Qaeda and ISIS since 9/11 and (b) the accentuated line that has been drawn by way of ‘us and them’ (read: Islām versus ‘the Rest’ as propounded by Samuel Huntington in his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*). Incidentally, in this regard, the opposing forces are also responsible for accentuating the divide with certain right-wing factions fanning deliberate fires of suspicion. A clear-eyed analysis would, therefore, bring to the fore the simplicity with which the Islāmists have been able to not only rest, recuperate and turnover, but are readying themselves for the next onslaught, which, in my opinion, is the ongoing ‘Third Wave of Radicalization’.

### 3. The Waves of Radicalization

Whereas we witnessed massive violent movement and radicalization between 1999 and 2005, which I describe as the ‘First Wave’, the ‘Second Wave’ began with the ‘oath of allegiance’ or the *Bay’ah* by groups such as JMB and ABT to ISIS in the wake of the formation of the neo-caliphate of Abu Bakr-al-Baghdadi. It was also the time when the *hijrah* (or the ‘migration’) was undertaken in response to the ‘call from Ar-Raqqah’. The territorial setbacks witnessed persistent ‘lone-wolf’ attacks throughout the world including places such as Orlando, Nice, Paris, Milan and Berlin.

The new ‘call to arms’ is to decimate the infidel wherever found as the *hijrah* was no longer an undemanding affair. However, relentless action by Bangladesh security forces – prior to Sheikh Hasina’s ouster – against the Islāmists had quietened the radicals momentarily and the ‘battle’ had been, temporarily, handed over to the good offices of HIB and IAB, and now to the Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh which has popular support in the Bangladesh legislature. These groups first kept the movement alive by demanding, in 2013, the enactment of blasphemy laws, non-erection of ‘un-Islāmic’ statues, and insistence on making “Islamic education mandatory from primary to higher secondary levels, cancelling the women policy, and anti-religion education policy” and “[f]reedom for all arrested ulema and madrasa students and withdrawal of all cases filed against them, compensation for the victims, and bringing the assailants to justice”. In 2025, HIB leader Mufti Enayetullah Abbasi renewed the demands, against threats of an ‘armed revolution’, particularly as to declaring the Ahmadiyya commu-

nity as non-Muslims, the enactment of blasphemy laws, and an end to “subservience to India and the United States”.<sup>14</sup>

But the above will witness a sea change with the return of the radical Jamaat-e-Islami to Bangladesh. Its reappearance has for now consummated, as aforesaid, politically rather than by taking recourse to belligerent means: at the general election of 12 February 2026, it took 68 seats directly and 77 in alliance, becoming the principal parliamentary opposition. However, whether parliamentary incorporation dampens or launders the Islāmist project is yet to be seen, but that the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami are two sides of the same coin cannot be doubted.

In any event, with the almost total territorial ouster of ISIS from the areas that it had occupied in Iraq and Syria, the strategy is about to witness a turn. Egged on by al-Qaeda and ISIS (presently, the Islamic State – Khorasan Province) which is already inside India, its affiliates would throw open the gates of radicalism and don a form that would be hitherto the most menacing. It would be a combination of (i) mass recruitment, (ii) protests against acts, laws and ministration that a combined grouping of radicals considers un-Islāmic – bringing thereby into their fold fence-sitters and moderates among the minority community – and (c) letting loose sophisticated forms of violence that most agencies would not be able to imagine, less counter.

Guidebooks and couched aggression that steer the deviant and radical mind are aplenty, and so are off-the-desktop explosive manuals that can showcase how a lethal weapon is assembled with relative ease. Triacetone triperoxide, an explosive known as the ‘Mother of Satan’, which was reportedly first used in the Paris bombings of 13 November 2015 and one which fits easily into a jacket – reports suggest – seems to have emerged as the flavour of the times.

What if a similarity of violence were to take place in Europe (where there is no visible political conflict)? Even if it were to be granted that the ‘missing’ youth (small in number) undertook the *hijrah* from certain countries because they are religious zealots, it would not explain the phenomenon of the hidden few who would imitate the ‘Cackle of Hyenas’<sup>15</sup> that are breeding across the globe and of late in the neighbourhood. What if the authorities were to suddenly stumble upon the perpetration of violence that is being witnessed by neo-converts: people from other faiths converting to Islām because an interpretation of the religion permits canonical inviolability and conduct hitherto proscribed?

Would a psycho-profiling, in the manner that closely examines every killing across the globe but has been written off as religion-driven radicalization, then be accepted? The counter-terrorism apparatus throughout the world has elegantly scripted the various radicalization typologies and provided countermeasure prescription.

However, the common understanding of Islām and the manner in which certain practitioners of the faith interpret its tenets in order to promote terror make a distinction between Islām and terrorism. The imperatives of radicalization and the need to counter it has to be comprehended in a holistic manner. The most important aspect that needs to be examined is whether violence that is being perpetrated across the world is only by puritans among Muslims. This contrasts with the doggedness with which a non-existent deradicalization programme continues to be pursued in a terror-torn world.

<sup>14</sup> “Hefazat calls on govt to accept its 13-point demand”, *The Daily Star*, 21 February 2025.

<sup>15</sup> The author would rather use a phrase attributing the killers to hyenas than to wolves, the latter, a dignified, but much maligned creature.

#### 4. Radicalization versus Recidivism

Research has shown that a number of Saudi Guantanamo detainees that were ‘de-radicalized’ have returned to terrorism upon release. Although it has been argued that de-radicalization creates a barrier to recidivism, there is really no way to fathom or evaluate whether a thorough cauterization has taken place. Or are there de-radicalized terrorists who disengage for purely instrumental reasons but continue to harbour a radical worldview? Who determines whether or not the law-enforcer is erring by arranging theological correction of ‘radicalized minds’ who have never actually read the Qur’ān? Answers to such questions can only come to the fore were a science that ‘looks inside the brain’ is employed. This theory applies to so-called de-radicalized terrorists as well as ones who have been thought to have been radicalized by religious injunction. After all, is it not conceivable that there are extra-religious reasons or considerations that could have propelled perpetrators of crimes to adopt a nihilistic *Weltanschauung* that led to the death and gore that we have witnessed since the ‘baying’ from Ar-Raqqah began? Has a neurological study ever been conducted on an Islāmist radical who has attempted to undertake the *hijrah* and has been apprehended midway? Shrunken amygdala or smaller ventromedial prefrontal cortex (which is indicative of a brain that propels aggressive conduct disorder) cannot be said to be any less intelligent. No less innovative are characters such as Omar Mateen and Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, or in the case of Milan, Anis Amri and Abderrahim Moutaharrik. The only way to appreciate what they did is to read deeper into what Byron might have understood in his immortal work *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* as the “wandering outlaw of his own dark mind”. The so-called ‘thought virus’ that is reportedly being spread by people such as Zakir Naik<sup>16</sup> only enforces the call of the wild. One of the convenient explanations which the sole survivor of the 1 July 2016 Dhaka hostage situation gave was that he was inspired by Naik’s speeches.

Therefore, the ‘radical’ not only finds an outlet sanctioned by an ‘establishment’ (in this case, Da’esh), but deceives the counter-terrorism apparatus and the world that it is the call of an Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that drove her into a killing frenzy. Therefore, even as a counter-radicalization programme is set in motion, the most important (initial) examination that should be conducted is to clinically unearth the real motivation of the perpetrator. The simplest explanation that abounds (particularly in media) is to term a killer ‘a bad Muslim’ because he or she has misinterpreted the Qur’ān. An acceptable explanation could well have been to call them psychopaths who found a universe of discourse and a clear, unambiguous, audible paradigm where their behaviour is not only encouraged, but glorified by recourse to prophetic injunctions.

#### 5. Final *Fitnah* of the Mind

In *Dabiq*,<sup>17</sup> almost all acts of barbarism had instant ‘endorsement’

<sup>16</sup> Zakir Naik is an Indian Islāmīc televangelist, radical preacher and public orator who focuses on comparative religion. He is the founder of the Islamic Research Foundation and the Peace TV Network, which was one of the largest religious satellite channels globally.

<sup>17</sup> In geopolitics and security studies, ‘*Dabiq*’ refers to two highly interconnected elements: a small town in northern Syria and the notorious flag-

ship propaganda magazine of ISIS named after it.

by recourse to a *shūrāh*. For instance, the burning alive of the Jordanian pilot Mu’adh Safi Yusuf al-Kasasibah was called “equivalent response” by Da’esh. It quoted an *’ayat* from An-Nahl thus: “and if you punish (an enemy), punish with an equivalent of that with which you were harmed”. In other words, it said that in burning the Jordanian pilot alive and burying him under a pile of debris, Da’esh carried out a just form of retaliation for his involvement in the bombing campaign which resulted in the killing of countless Muslims who, as a result of these airstrikes, were burned alive and buried under mountains of wreckage. Da’esh cunningly makes use of the Qur’ān to justify its ghastly acts, utilizes such acts to deter other pilots, and, as this brief seeks to put forward, appeals to minds on the prowl for dark passageways. It is, therefore, in the realm of the mind that the final *fitnah*<sup>18</sup> is to be waged.

But even as counter-radicalization methods are fine-tuned and put into practice, what cannot be dismissed is the deviant brain factor, the possibility that a killer acts in the name of Islām in order to access a ‘psychological sanctuary’ which suddenly came into existence with the declaration of a ‘caliphate’. The awareness that her act of barbarism has the sanction of a divine authority only propels her forward. To that end, the battle to overcome deviant thought has to be preceded by a correct comprehension of the fundamentals. The world needs to add an altogether different methodology to comprehend the violence that is being perpetrated across the globe. It might sound unorthodox, but being a Muslim may have nothing to do with a lone terror actor going on a rampage in a European city on a Sunday afternoon. To be sure, the Qur’ān certainly never sanctions such acts. Indeed, it does not require the cogitation of a ‘Grand Zedi Order’, but, at the same time, it is too serious a matter to be left to sometimes short-sighted, ill-trained intelligence agencies.

The devotion of the opening remarks of this brief to neuropsychology may, therefore, be viewed as a custom that should *not* be honoured in its breach, but by recourse to quiet observance. Indeed, it is a comprehension of this unique process that might halt the progression of the ‘Third Wave of Radicalization’.

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