

This Form of Islam Sweeping Europe May Be More Dangerous Than Violent Jihad

There are increasing fears that European-born young men who go to Syria will get caught up in the fight of radical Islamic extremists to establish an Islamic Sharia-based state across Syria and Iraq, and then return to their own countries to try to do the same. A British man told the BBC on Friday he'd been fighting with the Al Nusra front, and would not return until the 'black flag of Islam' flies over Buckingham Palace.

In April 2014 Tony Blair urged the West to set aside its differences with Russia and China to focus on the growing threat from radical Islam. Blair said tackling "a radicalized and politicized view of Islam" should be at the top of the global political agenda. The former British prime minister did that in the context of his reflections on the action of Egypt's military government against its Muslim Brotherhood opponents. According to Blair, "the Muslim Brotherhood systematically taking over the traditions and institutions of the country."

Just before Blair's speech, news about the alleged plot to Islamize British schools in Birmingham increasingly caught the headlines of the press in the UK. Here too radical Islamist expressions of Islam seemed to be involved in taking over "traditions and institutions of the country."

Today estimates put the number of Muslims living in Europe at about 44 million—no official data is available, but almost all European countries host a Muslim minority. The vast majority are responsible citizens. But it is important for Western governments to understand that Islam has a radical part—called 'political Islam'—that is not homogeneous but has violent as

well as non-violent faces; and that in fact it's the NON-violent faces of political Islam that are the most dangerous for their societies.

'Islamism' or 'Political Islam'

A crucial factor generating tensions in the West is the presence of 'Islamism' or 'political Islam,' in all of its different manifestations, within Muslim communities. Islamism can be defined as "forms of political theory and practice that have as their goal the establishment of an Islamic political order in the sense of a state whose governmental principles, institutions and legal system derive directly from the shariah."

Analysts often equate such Islamists with 'jihadists', and do not distinguish between violent and non-violent strands. In his study of the spread of Islamism (or 'political Islam') in Europe, Lorenzo Vidino (an academic and security expert who specializes in Islamism and political violence in Europe and North America, a policy adviser at the European Foundation for Democracy) talks about Islamism as an "extremely diverse and ever-evolving political movement".

According to Vidino, "There are basically three categories of Islamists: violent rejectionists [in his paper he uses 'jihadists'], non-violent rejectionists and participationists."

Each of these components of political Islam has a different presence, structure and *modus operandi*. Each, consequently, presents a different kind of challenge to Europe. Europeans are finally paying attention to the jihadist threat, and have begun to devise new solutions to contain it. This is not least due to the fact that "homegrown" jihadists are fighting in the hundreds in Syria and—provided they survive—come back radicalized. However Europeans still have only a limited understanding of the other two segments of the movement.

‘Jihadists’ or ‘Violent Rejectionists’

“Violent rejectionists, often referred to as jihadists, are individuals and networks that, often linked to or inspired by al-Qaida, reject participation in the democratic system and use violence to advance their goals,” says Vidino. Violent rejectionists are usually the main, if not the only, targets of European counter-radicalization programs.

‘Non-Violent Rejectionists’

According to Vidino, “Non-violent rejectionists are individuals and groups such as Salafists and Hizb ut-Tahrir which openly reject the legitimacy of any system of government not based on Islamic law, but do not, at least publicly and openly, advocate the use of violence to further their goals.”

“Salafism preaches a return to a mythical Islamic golden era that can only be obtained by referring to the only unadulterated sources: the Quran and the hadith. Salafism is ‘not only scripturalist but also literalist,’ arguing that Muslims should behave exactly how the pious forefathers of Islam behaved, according to these sources,” writes Vidino. “Most refute violence, at least in Europe, but some do not and are better categorized as violent rejectionists—the lines are in some cases blurred. Salafism has been able to attract a growing number of European Muslims through its claims of simplicity, meaning and moral superiority,” Vidino adds. In the Birmingham schools, recruitment of Salafist parents onto committees was shown as one strategy used.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) “officially aims at disseminating its ideology and challenging the existing status quo without resorting to violence,” according to Vidino. As with Salafism the lines are however blurred. Vidino says, HT’s “rhetoric is sophisticated and skillfully tailored to the ears of Western Muslims... Members of HT tend to be highly educated young professionals who are second-generation Muslim immigrants in

Europe, and their ranks are buttressed further by a small cadre of converts.”

‘Participationists’

Vidino sees “at the bottom of the Islamist pyramid the numerically most significant component of political Islam in Europe: the Muslim Brotherhood and other ‘participationist’ Islamic Movements.” “Participationists are individuals and groups which adhere to that strand of Islamism that advocates interaction with society at large, both at the micro-level through grassroots activism, and at the macro-level through participation in public life and the democratic process,” explains Vidino. “Unlike rejectionists”, he says “such organizations have made a conscious decision to avoid unnecessary confrontation and have instead opted for a clever and flexible policy of engagement with the European establishment.”

The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Western Countries

The characteristics of this ‘participationist’ role are, according to Vidino, “precisely outlined in the seminal book *Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase*, published in 1990 by the top Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Qaradawi devotes a large section of his book to the presence of Muslim minorities in Western countries and the unprecedented opportunity that this phenomenon may represent for the Islamic Movement, which, in Qaradawi’s words, can “play the role of the missing leadership of the Muslim Nation [*umma*] with all its trends and groups” in guiding and shaping the minds of Muslim immigrants living in the West.”

Vidino observes, “Qaradawi has a simple recipe for how the Islamic Movement can become the guide of Muslim communities in the West: ‘Try to have your own small society within the larger society,’ says Qaradawi, ‘your own Muslim ghetto.’ The

Egyptian cleric advocates the creation of a web of Islamic centers, think tanks, magazines, mosques and conferences so that the Islamic Movement can spread its politicized version of Islam among Western Muslims. At the same time, Qaradawi advocates moderation and relative openness when dealing with non-Muslims. At least in these early stages, he writes, confrontation can only damage the movement, whereas displaying a moderate façade will allow the Brothers to operate under the radar screen.”

According to Vidino, “A second goal common to all European Brotherhood organizations is the designation as official or *de facto* representatives of the Muslim community of their country. Becoming the preferred—if not the exclusive—partners of European governments and elites would serve various purposes. One, publicly and proudly declared by the Brothers, is to positively contribute to the future of European society. Highlighting common values, the Brothers, in fact, present themselves as a moderate force encouraging Muslims to simultaneously participate in society and spread their Islamic principles, which, ultimately, benefit everybody.”

Vidino concludes, “by leveraging such a relationship, in fact, the Brothers aim at being entrusted by European governments with administering all aspects of Muslim life in each country. They would, ideally, become those whom governments task with preparing the curricula and selecting the teachers for Islamic education in public schools, appointing imams in public institutions such as the military, the police or the prison service, and receiving subsidies to administer various social services.”

Back to the Birmingham Schools

This brings us back to the Birmingham schools. The five-pronged strategy presented in the leaked document describing “Operation Trojan Horse” very much reflects Qaradawi’s vision for the spread of the Islamic Movement in the West. It is the

archetype of the participationist strategy.

Educational institutions are gradually infiltrated and taken over. There is no outbreak of violence; the key is (intense) pressure. This is the non-violent face of political Islam. Although creating a culture of fear and intimidation in schools, marginalizing or forcing teachers out of their jobs, leading children at a supposedly non-religious primary school in anti-Christian chanting, canceling normal Christmas activity... all this could be considered (hidden) 'violence' too.

The document "Operation Trojan Horse" shows the participationists could tap into the pool of Salafi parents. These parents are not likely to commit direct violent actions, but they could be prone to strong radicalization of their religious goals.

Political Islam Gradually Expands Territory

Western governments have to understand that the events in Birmingham are very typical of the way Islam is expanding in the West. Political Islam is gradually expanding its territory, partly by radicalizing moderate Islamic expressions, partly by the proliferation of mosques and partly by taking over "traditions and institutions" in countries. Violent incidents are even useful in this strategy: rare incidents of physical violence give participationists the possibility to side with the government against the 'bad guys' while proclaiming themselves the 'good guys.' The effect is a vicious circle of appeasement policies by the local authorities that facilitates the further spread of political Islam, and leaves the non-Muslim population defenseless or otherwise provokes an unwelcome 'far right' sentiment in society.

It follows that Western governments have to reflect well on their limits in respect to the manifestations of political

Islam. The culture of 'appeasement' makes their citizens and societies vulnerable to manipulation by Islamists for the sake of furthering their Islamic supremacy in the West. In the end this could be devastating for Western societies. Serious public debate and strict government policies are indispensable to turn the tide of Islamist expansion.

The full report can be found here: "Islamism in Europe", Dr. Lorenzo Vidino, Senior Fellow at the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich and a Policy Adviser at the European Foundation for Democracy

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