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Paternalism, Ijtihad & Counter-Terrorism

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THERE is growing consensus amongst groups opposed to violent extremism that the only way to effectively and permanently neuter support for these extremists is to attack their ability to recruit by de-legitimizing their ideology. This can be done by providing a counter-ideology -- to battle ideas with ideas. There are two basic approaches in this ideological battle. The first is the paternalistic approach of imposing an alternative view on the community on what is the true interpretation of Islam. The second approach emphasizes the practice of ijtihad or a more consensual approach to understanding Islam.

When one looks at Al Qaeda's message, one sees that it is simple, comprehensive and accessible to a wide audience. It states that Islam is under attack from the West and its allies, and conveniently interprets all world events in accordance with this view. Hence, disparate regional conflicts, involving Muslim populations in Kashmir, Palestine, Chechnya, Iraq and Afghanistan provide powerful evidences for Al Qaeda's conspiratorial claims. Regardless of the different socio-political and economic conditions, Al Qaeda's solution to the problem is simple. All Muslims are to take up armed struggle against the West and their lackeys. The compact narrative is easily transferable from current battle fronts to relatively peaceful areas such as Southeast Asia. For example, Indonesian terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah, which has adopted Al Qaeda's transnational ideology, seeks to establish its brand of Islamic rule in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines and Australia.

Countering Al Qaeda

On the other hand, the opposing voices have been weak and unclear. In one camp are those who propose to hand out to the public an equally compact and palatable diet of counter-ideologies that would also be accessible to them. Psychological operations are to be conducted where information, packaged in an easily comprehensible way, are fed to a wide audience. A new set of ideas is to replace that of Al Qaeda's. These ideas are broadly that Islam is not under attack, that Islam is compatible with democracy, and that it is not necessary to implement Shariah as understood in accordance with the stringent standards of the legal traditionalists.

Clearly, education of the masses is necessary where education seeks to replace the "wrong" ideas with the "right" ones. A kind of paternalism is involved, where individuals are fed counter-ideologies, without encouraging them to critically question these "right" ideas. Paternalism here refers to the attitude or system where a group of elites make decisions on behalf of others purportedly for their good, even if this might be contrary to the latter's opinions. Hence the paternalistic system deprives individuals of their freedom to critically

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evaluate, and only nominally serves their interests while in fact pursuing the acutal agenda of fighting terror, and generally preserving the current status quo.

In the other camp are those who see the rise of violent extremism as reflective of a crisis within the Muslim world following a long period of stagnation. It is alleged that individuals are no longer practising Islam's essential value of ijtihad (personal reasoning). Many religious institutions have also adopted an unquestioning attitude. This has allowed the revival of radical approaches to Islam. One example would be the call for a return to the legalist tradition which requires states to strictly apply classical interpretation of the Shariah laws without questioning its applicability in the current context. Another example is the revival of the theological puritanical tradition which requires one to live as the Prophet and his companions had lived. The most significant phenomenon under this trend is the Wahabi Movement.

The need for Ijtihad

The point then is to seek the revival of the practice of ijtihad as a possible solution, and scholars have been busy doing so in the study of Islamic texts. Applying different conceptual tools to understand the Hadith (the Prophet's Sayings) and the Shariah, scholars argue that it is important to understand the socio-political context in which the words were spoken or codified in the texts. For example, the circumstances of Revelation (circumstances in which the Prophet revealed God's Words) must be understood in order to decipher the true meaning of the Prophet's teachings. Who was the Prophet addressing? What was the social context? What was the value which he held important when these words were spoken?

The same applies to the understanding of the Shariah. It must be understood that the Shariah was developed by the Jurists over the span of a few centuries after the death of the Prophet. The Jurists had studied the Quran and the Sunnah (the Prophet's Ways) to extract principles and values of Islam and apply them in the existing social context. Hence, while the laws might have been applicable to the context then, they may no longer be applicable today. It is therefore also essential to decode the Shariah to understand the true meaning of Islam.

However, some problems may arise. For example, having decoded the text, some scholars find that the principles and values extracted from the text are actually universal values such as justice, benevolence, compassion and wisdom, creating what some may consider a watered-down version of Islam. Scholars then debate this problem. Further, it has also been suggested that there exists a hierarchy to the Quranic values that are revealed in the verses. Scholars again debate which values are more important. For example, is it more important to punish someone for committing a crime in order to uphold justice, or is it more important to show benevolence and help the perpetrator reform?

The important and, still unanswered question, is how accessible are these debates to the general public? As long as these issues are not adequately addressed, can the intellectual practice of ijtihad on Islamic texts be of any value to counter-terrorism? If the Islamic scholars are too engaged in the intellectual debates to be able to provide true guidance to ordinary Muslims, what is to happen to counter terrorism efforts?

Dilemma of paternalism and ijtihad

The dilemma of paternalism and the practice of ijtihad is thus this: paternalism negates the

essence of ijtihad where true intellectual debate is to take place. Paternalism looks for quick fixes to the current violent extremist problems, proposing a set of ideas taken to be the correct one; the practice of ijtihad in decoding the ideas of Islam is still subjected to much debate, unable to lend much help to current counter-terrorism efforts. However, it is the practice of ijtihad that has the ability to revive Islam's ability to guide after long periods of stagnation in the Muslim world following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Which way should efforts be concentrated on would therefore depend on one's goal: whether one is looking for a quick fix and to protect the current status quo, or whether one is ready for genuine change or progress to take place. Regardless of the existing tension between paternalism and ijtihad, ultimately, a balancing act, no matter how difficult, is preferred: Islamic scholars could draw up a working formulation of ideas which could then be actively promoted, whilst at the same time continue the existing intellectual debates. Most importantly, the greater Muslim population must be engaged in these practices of ijtihad.

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