

Research Proposal: The Problem of Islamic Fundamentalism in England and its International Dimension

Tolerance International

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I. Introduction

The 20th century was marked by the rise and decline of world spanning ideologies such as liberalism, fascism and communism. With the collapse of the Soviet Union we seemed to have finally entered a post-ideological age in which former political frameworks such as “left” and “right” have lost much of its meaning. This was supposedly the “end of history” as Francis Fukuyama put it. However, this view was incorrect on many accounts. Another major ideological force had appeared on the world stage, which has continuously expanded in the West since the Second World War. This ideological force is Islamic fundamentalism and the West’s ability (or inability of coping with it) will determine the course of this century.

In a time when religion was in retreat in the West, religion became a unifying element in many countries, which had just achieved independence. In particular Islam has rapidly expanded and is now the fastest growing religious faith in the world. There are now over a 1.3 billion Muslims living in 55 countries.¹ Considering the fact that Muslims represent a large and growing proportion of the world population and that Muslim states in the Middle East and Asia control great wealth in the form of natural resources, there can be little doubt that Islam will be one of the main ideological forces of the 21st century. The question whether there can be peace and respect between the Western and the Islamic civilization, or whether we are headed towards a century of “Muslim Wars” could be one of the most important issues, which mankind currently faces.²

Why is Islam, which is a religion that promotes peace, such a serious threat to the West? The answer is that the main problem does not lie in Islam itself, but in the fundamentalist interpretation of it, which sees Islam as a complete social and political model incompatible with the West. Fundamentalists completely reject the Western style social and political system and view Western societies as inherently corrupt and evil. Fundamentalist believe that the world is divided in a

¹ See A.S. Ahmed (2003), *Islam Under Siege/ Living Dangerously in a Post-Honour World*, Cambridge, Polity Press, p. 7.

² See S.P. Huntington (2002), ‘The Age of Muslim Wars’, *Newsweek Special Edition*, Issues 2002 February, pp. 6-13.

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dar al Islam or Islamic realm (house of peace) and a dar al harb, or a realm of decadence and paganism (house of war).³ Fundamentalists view the world as the place of a life-and-death struggle or jihad of the forces of Islam against the forces of decadence and disbelief.⁴ Therefore, in this scenario there cannot be permanent peace unless the whole world is Islamised and unified under the umbrella of an Islamic superstate. At the very least fundamentalists want to recreate a pan-Islamic empire in the Middle East and Mediterranean region, as it existed during the Middle Ages. This idea is for example promoted by Osama bin Laden in his second declaration of war in 1998. He also claimed that “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies--civilians and military--is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.”⁵ Although this message was hardly taken seriously or even noticed in the West during that time, this has changed significantly since 9/11.

Islamic fundamentalism is certainly not a new phenomenon. Like any other belief system, Islam has undergone periods of crisis and revival. It seems that in times of crisis people tend to turn towards religion and more radical ideas become appealing to the masses. The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War marked the centuries long decline of the Islamic civilization. Islamic lands were eventually colonised and occupied by Western powers and Western culture and government was imposed on Islamic societies. What is seen by many Arabs as a particular humiliation was the creation of the state Israel, which is in their eyes just a continuation of Western colonialism and power politics in the Middle East. For some time Middle Eastern states tried to embrace Westernization and secularisation according to the example of the Kemalists in

³ See A.S. Ahmed (2003), *Islam Under Siege/ Living Dangerously in a Post-Honour World*, Cambridge, Polity Press, p. 17.

⁴ See Y.M. Choueiri (1990), *Islamic Fundamentalism*, London, Pinter, p. 135.

⁵ See O. bin Laden (1998), “Text of Fatwah Urging Jihad Against Americans”, published in Al-Quds al-'Arabi on February 23, 1998.

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Turkey. However, this flirtation of Middle Eastern elites with Western conceptions of the state and society only caused an aggressive fundamentalist reaction of religious leaders and the ordinary people. An important example of this is Egypt in which the movement of the religious brotherhood was founded. One of its leaders was Sayyed Outb, one of the fathers of radical Islam, who claimed that Islam is incompatible with secularism and that Muslims shall aim to overthrow secular governments in order to replace them with Islamic states upholding the shari'a law. A turning point in history was the Iranian revolution that brought an Islamic fundamentalist regime into power, which propagated Islam as an alternative to the model of the Western secularised state. This shows that Islam is not simply a religion like any other. It is a complete social system with its own social, political and cultural dimensions.⁶

Islam and its radical interpretation was an important factor in the decolonisation of the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and North Africa. It has proved to be more durable and successful than Arab nationalism and it spread through the West through immigrants and the communities they built. Today millions of Muslims from the Middle East and Asia are living in the West. Their radicalisation through fundamentalist ideologies, which are spread by Islamic states, organisations and certain individuals, poses a great threat to the West, as they encourage Muslims to reject integration and to take part in a general jihad against the West and the Western concept of a liberal society.

II. Relevance of the Problem

Identifying the reasons of Islamic fundamentalism is crucial for addressing the issues. For a long time Britain has, like many other Western countries, simply ignored the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism. Robert Baer accuses Western security services that they were particularly complacent about the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism rising in their midst. He claims that "In most parts of the Middle East, bookstores are forbidden from selling radical Islamic tracts that

⁶ See D. Hiro (1989), *Islamic Fundamentalism*, London, HarperCollins, p. 61.

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openly advocate violence, but in London's Arabic bookstores there were racks of them.”⁷ In his book he paints the picture of the Muslim communities in the West being a “hothouse of Islamic fundamentalism”. But to what extent is this picture actually true? Some of the 9/11 terrorist, most prominently their leader Mohammed Atta, had lived many years within Western countries. The terrorist involved in the 7/7 attacks in London had lived for many years in England. There is little doubt that there are Islamic fundamentalist groups within the UK, which are prepared to take part in a global jihad against the West. However, the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism in England is little researched and at the moment it is far from obvious what actually drives young men, who are living in a free and democratic society, to become martyrs for an idealised version of Islam. This research project aims to explore this question and tries to develop viable policy options for tackling the problem of Islamic fundamentalism in England.

The danger of Islamic fundamentalism has an external and an internal dimension. Both of them are inextricably linked to each other and there is no way of addressing the domestic issues without at the same time addressing the international issues. This basic truth has shown itself in the Salman Rushdie affair of 1989, which first brought the problem of fundamentalism to the attention of the British public and government.⁸ Rushdie had published his book *Satanic Verses*, which was perceived by Muslims as highly offensive because it ridiculed Prophet Mohammed and claimed that some verses in the Quran are the work of the devil. It led to fatwa by Ayatollah Khomeini against Rushdie demanding his death after Margaret Thatcher had refused to prohibit the book. It also resulted in violent outbursts in Bradford, West Yorkshire, in which copies of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* were burned. The series of real and perceived offences against Muslims has not stopped since then. The latest outrage was caused by the so-called Mohammed cartoons that appeared in a Danish newspaper in 2005. Again it caused violent attacks by Muslims in Europe, though not in Britain.

⁷ See R. Baer (2002), *See No Evil/ The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism*, New York, Crown Publishers, p. XV.

⁸ Compare G. Kepel (1997), *Allah in the West/ Islamic Movements in America and Europe*, Cambridge, Polity Press, pp. 126-146.

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Also problematic are the new aggressive methods of the British policy of closing off Muslim communities and rounding up dozens of terror suspects. These methods maybe justified preventing major terrorist attacks, but they help little to improve the relations between Muslim and British communities. To the contrary, it only creates the general impression of ordinary Muslims that they are victims in a conflict for which they are simply not responsible.

The widest implication of the rise of fundamentalism is what can be explained by Samuel Huntington's concept of a civilizational struggle that has replaced the Cold War world order.⁹ Huntington certainly does not suggest that a "clash of civilizations" is inevitable, but contends that it might be a possible future scenario. The emerging core state of the Islamic civilization is Iran and there is the possibility of the conflict of the West with Iran turning into another regional war. Short of conventional war, terrorism has become a highly effective new form of war, which can be employed by weaker states against the much more powerful Western states. Terrorist sponsors can use ideology and their financial reserves to fund radical Islamic groups in the West and encourage them to commit terrorist attacks against the infidels.

Obviously, not every Muslim in the West is a fundamentalist and there are lots of Islamic organisations of a very benign nature. At the same there are radicals and terrorist hiding within Muslim communities and there are Islamic organisations, which are closely linked to global terrorism. Distinguishing the benign from the dangerous has become extremely difficult. Some Westerners might ask 'why bother?', as Islam appears ever more threatening and ever more extreme counter-terrorism and security measures appear to be necessary. The proposed research project, however, intends to make that distinction and to show the relationship between the benign side of Islam and its dangerous side in the form of fundamentalism. It is a project that could contribute to address some of the most important issues of our time and might give some guidance to the path British society could take in the coming decades.

⁹ Compare S.P. Huntington (1997), *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, London, Simon & Schuster.

III. Research Question

The aim of the research project is to explore the causes why Muslims in England become fundamentalists and to what extent ideological subversion is responsible for this development. What is Islamic fundamentalism all about and what attracts Muslims living in Western societies to it? There are several possible explanations that can be found in the literature on this phenomenon.

- 1) The Islamic civilization has failed to adapt to modernity and is still in terminal decline.¹⁰

Fundamentalism becomes attractive to people as it promises a revival of Islam's glorious past. Fundamentalists reject Western societies and life styles mainly so much because of the relative weakness of Islamic states and societies with respect to political and economic power and cultural influence. In the moment of crisis the West is identified as the outside enemy in order to achieve political cohesion among Muslim states and communities around the world and restore Islam as one of the world's most powerful societal and political models.

- 2) The cause for Muslims in the West turning to fundamentalism is their political and economic marginalisation and their failure of integration in Western societies. The argument has been made that poverty, unemployment and lack of education was responsible for the rise of fascism and communism in Europe and Russia early in the 20th century. Hitler, it is said, came to power because he reflected a general sentiment of German working class and promised an easy solution to Germany's extreme misery during the Great Depression. Similarly it could be the case that Muslims in the West are radicalised because they have far fewer opportunities than Westerners in terms of education and job prospects. At the same time they feel powerless as they feel excluded from the political process in the Western countries in which they are living in. Such people have little to lose and this of course makes them susceptible to ideologies that promise a solution to their personal situation. This of course encourages radicalisation.

¹⁰ Compare B. Lewis (2003), *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

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- 3) It could be the case that the real reason why European societies have become a “hothouse of terrorism” is the ideological subversion through fundamentalist states and groups like Iran and al Qaeda, which nurture radicalisation. The main cause for the radicalisation of Muslims and Muslim communities is then identified as outside ideological subversion. Muslims living in the West become radicalised because the granted freedom of opinion allows fundamentalists to more or less openly advocate jihad against Western society and values, in some cases to even advocate violence. The openness and liberties of Western democracies make them particularly vulnerable to such ideological attacks against which the West has no counter-ideologies to offer.

Identifying the real reason for the rise of fundamentalism in the West has major implications for the way in which the problems of fundamentalism and terrorism shall be addressed. In the first case it might be just a matter of time until “they” become exactly like us: freedom-loving-market-economy-embracing individualists, as is suggest by Fukuyama and Barber.¹¹ The second case would suggest that it would be crucial to address socio-economic issues of Muslims in the West and in the Middle East in order to make them turn away from a highly politicised interpretation of Islam. In the third case the most important measure would be to cut off this detrimental outside influence and funding and to integrate Muslims more into the framework of Western societies by also offering immigrants an alternative identity and ideology.

Tolerance International believes that socio-economic factors are most important in the process of Islamic radicalisation. Economic marginalisation of Muslims in the West prepares the ground for their subversion through outside fundamentalist ideologies. These outside ideologies could not succeed without it. Improving the economic situation of Muslims and Muslim

¹¹ Compare F. Fukuyama (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*, London, Hamish Hamilton and B. Barber (2003), *Jihad vs. McWorld*, London, Corgi.

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communities and involve them more in British cultural and political life could be the best option for defeating fundamentalism in the West.

IV. Methodology

The aim of the project is to conduct empirical research into Muslims and Muslim communities in England to find out about their attitudes, belief sets, behaviour, social and economic situation and their participation in local and national British politics. It will be necessary to identify the main geographic areas where Muslims live and also particular representative Islamic communities in England. The research will include the review of relevant literature, the analysis of official statistics, Internet research, interviews, questionnaires and observation. For understanding the problem it is essential to define Islamic fundamentalism and to look at its origins and the reasons for its present revival. What makes Islamic fundamentalism so dangerous to Western society? Is a peaceful coexistence of Western style societies and fundamentalist societies even theoretically possible, or is violent conflict already built into the fundamentalist ideology? To what extent does fundamentalism as a political ideology deviate from Islam as a religious belief? How do ordinary Muslims cope with these different dimensions of Islam? How does being a Muslim affect their normal lives in the British society? What kind of influence has it on their political opinions and voting behaviour? To what extent do Muslim immigrants participate in British political life, if at all?

How similar are belief sets and life styles compared to the Islamism practiced in fundamentalist states like Iran? Do Muslim religious and community leaders and ordinary Muslims agree completely with the Islamic fundamentalists living in the Middle East? To what extent are Muslim immigrant communities influenced by Western ideas and life styles? How susceptible are young Muslims born in Britain to fundamentalism and to what extent depends this on the geographic areas in which they live and their overall socio-economic situation?

V. Research Plan

The research will be carried out in the following geographic areas: London, Birmingham, Manchester and West Yorkshire. These are the areas with biggest and oldest Muslim communities in England. They are also the areas where most tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims have erupted in the past. The research will initially focus on the London area and will at a later stage expand to the other identified areas. The project will consist of three phases: planning, implementation and production. The time frame for the overall research project should be between 12 and 18 months. It would require a team of about three to four researchers. Estimated costs would be about £100.000 to cover salaries, travel expenses, office space, the costs of the dissemination of the results and other expenses.

Phase One: Planning

Duration: about three months

Purpose: prepare the ground for the empirical research

In the initial phase of a research project it is crucial to identify and to define the precise research problem and to think about of the best way of collecting relevant information. A hypothesis concerning the phenomenon that is to be researched needs to be formulated. The working hypothesis is at the moment that Islamic fundamentalism in the West is linked to socio-economic factors that prepare the ground for ideological subversion from the outside.

At the beginning should be a review of relevant secondary literature and statistics on fundamentalism, Muslims in the West, immigration and policies and the historic development of immigrant communities in Britain. This will help to clarify what kind of information is already available and what information still needs to be collected. Secondly, once it is decided what information needs to be collected from where, the details of the research implementation can be planned. For example, this includes designing questionnaires and interview strategies and planning

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the progression of the project. Thirdly, Muslim community leaders and other knowledgeable people would need to be contacted to arrange interviews and to gain their cooperation for this project.

Phase Two: Implementation

Duration: three to six months

Purpose: collection of data through quantitative and qualitative methods

In this project phase relevant data is collected according to the research planning. In this process it will be unavoidable to make adjustments to the initial plan, as obstacles may appear and as first results become available. The collection effort will involve a lot of travelling, but it might be possible to carry out a significant proportion of data collection by phone, mail, e-mail or observation of websites and weblogs. Interviews will be summarised in short reports and information derived from questionnaires can be inputted in databases and summarised in tables and charts.

Phase Three: Production

Duration: three to six months

Purpose: to analyse the collected data and to turn it into publishable material

In the final phase the data collection is completed and the data is analysed with respect to testing the initial hypothesis. The aim of research is also to develop a theory or at least model that would allow the interpretation of the observed phenomenon and maybe the prediction of its future development. In the production phase the research methods and results will be written up and prepared for publication. The results will then be published either in the form of several articles or as a single major publication. So it might be necessary to find a suitable publisher and to bring the material into an appropriate format. This process alone could take a few months.

VI. Dissemination of Results

Apart from the production of a scientific study, it is the intention of Tolerance International to disseminate the results to a much wider audience than just academia in order to promote Tolerance International's overall aims. The results will need to be disseminated through a range of media

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including booklets, seminars, lectures, and potentially radio and TV, to English and Muslim communities. Another important recipient for the research results is of course the British government. The British government has an interest in maintaining peace and good relations with the immigrant communities and any effort of understanding Islamic fundamentalism and in educating people about its dangers should find the support of the government. There may be opportunities of working together on this issue with local councils and even the Home Office.

An important aspect of the research project is a connected community engagement programme. This could take many forms, for example, the establishment of discussion groups and web forums, the organisation of community events and the participation in local government. It is very difficult in the beginning to determine what kind of measures and efforts will be most successful in raising the awareness of the dangers of fundamentalism. This is simply one of the things that can only be figured out by doing it. In any case, it is necessary to start cautiously and to first build up trust between the parties involved before taking too great and too ambitious steps. In fact, it would be recommendable to leave the community engagement programme to a later stage of the research project when it has become clear what levels of cooperation and support are possible from the side of the Muslim communities as well as the British government.

VII. Policy Options

The ultimate aim of Tolerance International's work is to inform and influence British policy with respect to the problem of Islamic fundamentalism. Tolerance International supports peaceful relations among civilizations and mutual understanding of people of different religious beliefs. This research project focuses on the domestic issue of rising fundamentalism within Britain. The research results will have implications for the policy fields of immigration, education, community relations and social justice. However, the research project intends to show that the problem of fundamentalism is also inextricably linked to foreign policy issues in the fields of international security, economic

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cooperation and the democratisation of the Middle East. This final section will briefly outline some of the policy options for the British government.

Domestic Issues:

Immigration

In many Western states it is generally perceived as problematic to allow too many people of different cultural backgrounds to permanently settle down within their borders. As a result, Western states have erected substantial barriers to immigration in order to control the continuous stream of economic refugees and asylum seekers. The main concerns are the economic capacity of the host states to absorb immigrants and the refusal of many immigrants to integrate into Western societies. The question that this research project maybe able to answer is to what degree Muslim immigrants are integrated into British society and whether or not this poses a problem for the British society. The main policy options for immigration would be forced integration on one end of the spectrum or laissez faire multiculturalism on the other end of the spectrum.

Education

Closely linked to the question of integration is education. Children are required by law to attend school till the age of 16. The British government decides over curricula and the methods and specifics of tuition. These requirements clash with the desire of many immigrants to educate their children according to their own cultural background and values. There is for example the issue whether teachers or pupils should be allowed to wear the veil during school, or whether children of immigrants should be allowed to miss school in order to honour their own religious holidays or travel for extended periods to their home countries. In some cases immigrant children even lack the ability to communicate properly in the English language, which affects their performance at school. The research project could determine to what extent these issues are real problems, or whether they have been misrepresented by the media. The policy options would be to make no special allowances

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for immigrant children on the one hand, or to allow them to attend Islamic schools instead of state schools on the other hand.

Community Relations

The chosen geographic segregation of immigrants to British communities has in some cases separated them from the rest of British society. It is quite likely that this affects the mutual perception of immigrant communities and British communities in a very negative way as it reinforces prejudices and preconceptions. One aim of the research project would be to look at these mutual perceptions and to repair misperceptions by gaining a better understanding of each other and themselves. It is an opportunity to explore whether geographic segregation is a good option for all sides, or whether it would be better to encourage Muslim and British communities to become more open and mix more.

Social Justice

It is quite obvious that immigrants of non-Western cultural backgrounds tend to be economically disadvantaged compared to the rest of the British society. If radicalism and fundamentalism is indeed linked to the socio-economic situation of Muslim immigrants, then it would make sense to improve their economic situation, or at least their opportunities, in order to avoid their radicalisation. There would be various policy options to consider. For example, the British government could create jobs reserved for Muslims or support programmes that help create “Islamic” jobs. There could be scholarships specifically aimed at supporting immigrant children. Or the government could give money to Muslim communities, which they could use at their own discretion for supporting poor and old community members or for building community centres. Really a lot could be done to give immigrants more chances and to raise their living standard to the British average. The research project could help determining which ways of supporting Muslims and Muslim communities would be most effective.

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Foreign Policy Issues:

International Security

Addressing Islamic fundamentalism at home and abroad requires a prudent foreign policy, especially in the area of international security. Britain's decision to support the US invasion of Iraq has certainly contributed to Islamic radicalisation in Britain and it has triggered the 7/7 attacks in which 50 people died. At the moment there are three main foreign policy issues that are at the heart of Muslim sensitivity around the world: 1) Israel and the danger of another Israeli incursion into Lebanon in order to fight Hezbollah; 2) the danger of a dismemberment and Iranian control of Iraq once the Americans withdraw, which could be as soon as September 2008; and 3) the efforts of the Iranian fundamentalist regime to become a nuclear power combined with its continued support of fundamentalist groups and terrorist organisations in the Middle East and Europe. All these issues are linked to the emerging regional power Iran. Any British foreign policy aimed at tackling these issues needs to consider effective ways of dealing with Iran. One policy option would be appeasement by seeking an arrangement with the mullahs in Tehran. The opposite option would be military coercion. Both options are not viable, as Reagan's attempt to find an accommodation with "moderates" in Iran utterly failed in the 1980s, while a Western military intervention would not be able to find any public support and would most likely be beyond the military capabilities of even the mightiest military power in the world. Therefore encouraging a democratic transformation of Iran would be the only option that can address the current dangers to international security. Iranian exile communities will have an important role to play in this.

Economic Cooperation

The most important measures at the moment are of an economic nature. British foreign policy has the option to continue its relations with pro-Western Middle Eastern regimes on the bases of oil and weapons, or Britain could aim to achieve more economic justice by giving more development aid and improving the situation of the masses of people living in the Middle East. Better living

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conditions, better education, more opportunities and more justice of Muslims in their home countries will reduce their pressure of immigrating to the West and will diminish their susceptibility to radicalisation and ideological subversion.

Democratisation of the Middle East

The final aim of the West should be a true democratisation of the Middle East in order to break the vicious circle of corrupt elites, inherently instable regimes, regional tensions and wars and the radicalisation of the masses. This can only be a long term aim, as Middle Eastern societies are still characterised by tribalism and sectarianism. Efforts of imposing Western style governments on Middle Eastern societies have clearly failed in the past. Even now it is obvious that American nation building in Afghanistan and Iraq is not working. Another option would be to encourage the development of Islamic style democracies different to Western democracies and to allow Middle Eastern societies to determine for themselves what is best for them. This decision should and cannot be made by outsiders and it is imperative to give these, in some respects backward societies, sufficient time to reform themselves in a constructive way. The process of reform and general democratisation should, however, be supported by Western governments in a cautious, but determined manner.

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