

Root of Religious Extremist Thought and Sino-Arab Cooperation on De- radicalization

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Abstract: *Islam is a religion that advocates peace and abides by “the doctrine of balance”. However, religious extremism is a “tumor” for the development of Islam, and leads to an alienation of Islam. After the 9/11 attacks, Islamic extremism reappeared, mainly reflected in: 1) the teachings of Islam being distorted, and the civil movement of the Islamic revival leading to the mire of extremism; 2) Jihad ideology of Islam being misread, and the Islamic revival tending to be politicized and increasingly extreme; 3) Al-Qaeda, the “Islamic State” (IS) and other terrorist organizations were rapidly expanding, which drove Islamic extremism globally. The causes of the above circumstances are complex and have far-reaching impacts. The religious extremism*

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has stolen the discourse right of the interpretation of scriptures, resulting in the formation of religious extremism discourse. This became the deep-rooted reason of trends of religious extremism, and also led to the necessity of launching de-radicalization policies. In global anti-terrorism activities, China showed its uniqueness in seeking to play a constructive role in coordinating efforts of three major international anti-terrorist groups. This paper holds that cooperation between China and the Middle East countries on de-radicalization activities could focus on measures such as creating shared consensus in anti-terrorism, advancing the interpretation of scriptures, improving religious dialogue mechanisms, and highlighting the unique role of patriotic religious leaders and other initiatives, in order to effectively prevent religious extremism from expanding.

Key Words: *Religious Extremism; The “Belt and Road”; International Anti-terrorism Cooperation; De-radicalization*

On January 19, 2016, during his visit to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran, Chinese President Xi Jinping not only stressed the security cooperation as an important pillar of the comprehensive strategic partnership, but also launched new cooperation initiatives of de-radicalization. He underlined China’s fundamental stance that China “is opposing to link terrorism with any specific ethnic or religions, and is opposing to double standards”. In his view, China will further promote the international anti-terrorism cooperation under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) as it has consistently advocated for, and is committed to actively promoting the new mode of “source governance” of international cooperation in the field of de-radicalization and playing its due role in a new stage of global anti-terrorism activities.

I. Religious Extremism: The Alienation of Islam

Islam is a religion that advocates peace, unity, kindness and tolerance. However, religious extremism, as one of its countercurrents, has different manifestations on both historical and practical levels.

Three aspects, extremist ideologies, behavior and factions, should be focused on with respect to the history of the development of Islam. In the era of Four Righteous Caliphs, there were three Caliphs—Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn al-Affan, and Ali ibn Abi Talib all assassinated by extremists. During the Crusades, the Ḥashāshīn of the Islam not only carried out the assassination of the lords of Crusaders, but also assassinated political opponents within the religion and innocent Muslims. Such extremism has had a far-reaching influence.

From the end of the 18th Century to the early 19th Century, the Wahhabis legalized their “jihad” against non-Wahhabi Muslims, resulting in the first wave of violence in the Middle East; in the 20th Century, hijacking, assassinations and bombings by Wahhabis towards both the Arab countries leaders and Israeli authority led to the second and third wave of violence. Unfortunately, these phenomena did not elicit attention from Western countries until the 9/11 attacks (Rakic, M. & Jurisic, D., 2012: 651). Iran’s Islamic revolution led by Khomeini in January 1979, the capture of the Mecca Masjid in November 1979 by Wahhabi militants fighting the Saudi royal family, and the anti-Soviet Union Jihad in Afghanistan by the US-backed Bin Laden beginning in December 1979—those three events marked the emergence of religious extremism which had “formally stepped on the stage of international politics, and become a force that cannot be overlooked; it gradually formed a ‘Global Jihad

Ideology’’. In particular, since the “Arab Spring”, the revival of Al-Qaeda and the expansion of the so-called “Islamic State” both show the indisputable rising of religious extremism in the world. Obviously, religious extremism is one of the results of the alienation of Islam.

The essence of Islamic extremism is an important manifestation of political Islam. Since the 9/11 attacks, Islamic extremism has reappeared, and reflected mainly in the following aspects:

First, at the civil level, the Islamic doctrine has been distorted. As a result, the civil movement of Islamic revival was led to the mire of extremism. This is mainly reflected in: Firstly, behaviors apparent among some Muslims’ daily lives, such as wearing the black gown, keeping the beard, and tearing up the identity cards, are becoming increasingly rigid, conservative and even extreme. Secondly, incidents such as the repeatedly illegal preaching activities and murder of the *Mawla* of Xinjiang’s largest mosque reflect the fierce and cruel competition in discourse of Islam in Xinjiang. The extremism and the fight for the right of discourse are in the positive correlation, namely more intense the competition for Islamic discourse right, the higher level of extremism that civil movement of Islamic revival tends to be, and vice versa. Thirdly, some people began to listen to and watch violent Jihadist videos and audios, and random violent events in single, family or village scale started to emerge. For instance, a handful of extremist Muslims attacked police stations, stabbed innocent people (including Muslims and non-Muslims) in order to go to “Heaven” via “Jihad”.

Second, at the elite level, “Jihad” has been misread. As a result, the Islamic revival tended to be politicized and extreme. In the history of Islamic doctrines, the views of three thinkers on Jihad had a great influence on elite Muslims and the Islamic revival movement, namely, the proposal of the establishment of an “Islamic

State” by Hassan al-Banna, Islamist extremism advocated by Sayyid Qutb and Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi’s views about Jihad. In addition, the “pan-Islamism” and “pan-Turkism” since the end of the 19th Century were distorted under the Ottoman Empire into a trend colored with strong religious fanaticism and ethnic chauvinism. As a result, in the 1930s and 1940s, there were two “East Turkistan” governments in Xinjiang, giving birth to the “three forces” and resulting in separatist ideas of “seeking independence by violence” of the “East Turkistan”. The Islamic revival was showing a complex syndrome in combination of extremism and politicization.

Third, at the organizational level, the rapid expansion of violent terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and the IS resulted in Islamic extremism around the globe. In recent years, violent terrorist organizations influenced by the idea of violent Jihad are active in Central Asia and South Asia, such as the “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” (IMU), the “Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami”, “Jund al-Khilafa” (JAK) and the “Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement”. In particular, the “Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement” strives to integrate the Xinjiang violent terrorist activities into the global Jihad. It is proof that the leader of the “Islamic State” Baghdadi involved the words “China” and “Xinjiang” in his speech. At present, about 100 extremists with Chinese nationalities are active in the Middle East. Syria and Iraq have become training bases for Xinjiang “Jihad” extremists. This situation become much worse with the deterioration of the security situation in two countries seriously threatens to the security of China (*Ta Kung Pao*, 2014: July 30). The “Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement” has become part of international Jihad.

Therefore, religious extremists are carrying out violent, separatist, and extremist terrorist activities under the name of preaching, which deviate from any religious connotation. It is no

longer simply a religious problem, but a political problem instead. As a result, global Islamic extremism has become one of the major challenges for global governance.

II. Failure of the Interpretation of the Scriptures: The Formation of the Discourse Cage of Current Religious Extremism

There are complex factors that lead to the alienation of Islam and to Islamic extremism. Attention needs to be paid to the fact that religious extremism has stolen the discourse right of the interpretation of scriptures, resulting in the formation of religious extremism discourse. This has become the deep-rooted reason for trends of religious extremism, and also become an important breakthrough to de-radicalization. Due to the diversity and complexity of subject of the Islamic interpretation, at a time when religious extremism is rising in the world, the place of peaceful and orthodox Islamic discourse is gradually taken by submerged discourse of violent Islamic extremism, which resulted in the formation of cage of religious extremism discourse, including:

(a) Pan- violence tendency of the “Jihad” concept

“Jihad” in Arabic means “struggle and effort”; it can be divided into four different classes: heart (self-reflection), mouth (promotion of orthodox), pen (advocacy for goodness and punishment of evil), and sword (the fighting for the advocacy from the Allah). The last category is the jihad that resort to violence i.e., “Lesser Jihad”, and the first category is “Greater Jihad”. But in reality, the pan-violence of the concept of “Jihad” has become one of the important phenomena of the Discourse Cage of Current Religious Extremism. It has roughly gone through the following stages: 1) from the first orthodox Caliph Abu Bakr

al-Siddiq to the first half of 8th Century, the land of Arab Empire was basically formed. The interpretation of "Jihad" concept highlighted two major characteristics: first, the concept system was further defined and enriched; second, the subject of action changed from individuals to countries. 2) from the late Umayyad period to the Abbasid Dynasty, along with the halt of Muslim conquest and the gradual settling-down of the Islamic Empire, the calls for war were greatly weakened in the interpretation of "Jihad". In particular, the emergence of al-Sufiyyah further emphasized the "Greater Jihad" concept. The military meaning weakened, but some of the ideas of Jihadist thoughts still had a wide influence on the majority of Muslims, including the obligations to expand the areas of hostile Islam in the name of Islam; 3) since the second half of the 10th Century, the idea of defensive jihad had been gradually formed, especially Ibn Taymiyah's "Jihad" ideology had a wide influence, and it was inherited by Ibn Keum and Ibn Cahill, both of whom emphasized defending Islam through Jihad (Ren, J., 1981: 386)^①... These have deep influence on the formation of the discourse of religious extremism. Since modern times, the interpretation of the concept of Jihad has a tendency of global violence, which is increasingly obvious. Under the background of the contemporary international conflicts, "Jihad" is often used as a tool of interest groups to achieve their own goals. The increasingly obvious global violence tendency of the concept of "Jihad" is an inevitable outcome of religious extremism in the contemporary development.

(b) The fuzziness of the concept of "Ummah"

"Ummah" is the Arabic word for "nation". On September 24, A.D. 622, the prophet Mohamed migrated to Medina. After that,

^① Means the "non-Muslim settlements".

he established Muslim communes based on Islamic common belief, regardless of nationality, tribe and region, and had this written into the “Medina Charter” in the form of a covenant, which marked the official birth of “Ummah”. Although the early concept of “Ummah” in the *Koran* and Medina’s primary practice was identified as a religious community, with the development of the Islamic society, there occurred the separation of regime, sectarian differentiation and ethnic conflicts, which eventually led to the division of a unified Ummah” (Wu, B., 2007: 46). In a sense, the reconstruction of the “Ummah” has become an important part of the Islamic Revival Movement. The penetration of religious extremist ideas contributes to the process of “fuzzy of boundary of Ummah”; especially with the rapid development of the information technology, this has made a great impact on the reconstruction of “Ummah”. The phenomenon that individuals strengthen the sense of belonging as Muslims via telecommunication and information technology is called “the unification of Islam based on information network” (Wu, B., 2007: 47). This is worthy of further study. On June 29, 2014, Baghdadi proclaimed himself Caliph, and announced the establishment of the Islamic State. The targeted area covered most parts of the world. His ambition to create religious extremism “Ummah” is obvious. In short, the boundary of the “Ummah” concept is fuzzy.

(c) The conjecture of “suicide” action

Islam forbids suicide. The *Koran* and *hadith* have a relatively systematic explanation on this: 1) the destination for suicides is hell instead of heaven, “O ye who believe! Squander not your wealth among yourselves in vanity, except it be a trade by mutual consent, and kill not one another. Lo! Allah is ever Merciful unto you. Whoso doeth that through aggression and injustice, We shall cast him into Fire, and that is ever easy for Allah.” (*Koran*, 4:29-30).

2) Islam opposes the killing of innocent people; the *Koran* stipulates, "And slay not the life which Allah hath forbidden save with right. Whoso is slain wrongfully, We have given power unto his heir, but let him not commit excess in slaying. Lo! he will be helped." (*Koran*, 17:33). "Whoso slayeth a believer of set purpose, his reward is Hell for ever. Allah is wrath against him and He hath cursed him and prepared for him an awful doom." (*Koran*, 4:93). The majority of jurists believe that even in a state of war, it is not allowed to slaughter the non-military personnel. Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi clearly defines the meaning of non-military personnel, that is, those who have no ability to fight in the spirit and the flesh, or those who generally do not participate in combat, including women, children, the elderly, the sick, the wounded, and the blind, those with mental illness, travelers, hermits and religious people (Hashmi, S., 2003: 138-139). 3) Islam rules that suicides can hardly be tolerated in both Secularity and Afterworld. However, due to the proposals of Islam, it is an obligation for Muslims to launch wars against pagans, "apostates", people that refuse Islamic rule, as well as the intruder of Muslim homeland; to devote himself in the battle is the highest form of faith in Allah (Esposito, J., 1999). In addition, due to the great influence of pan-violent tendency of the "Jihad" concept, suicide is prone to be used as a tool of religious extremism to carry out the implementation of the "human bomb". In particular, when the two concepts of suicide and "violent Jihad" are bound together into the interpretation of Jihad, suicide is coined as "a shortcut into Heaven" and "kill the infidels can make you enter Heaven" and other extremist jihadist rhetoric.

(d) The intensification of Jihad's internal and external tension

Because of the primary status of Jihad in Islam, it makes the internal and external tension very obvious in the process of the Millennium Development of Islam: 1) outward expansion after the

combination of “Jihad” and “migration”. According to the “hadith”, prophet Mohamed said, after the recovery of Mecca, “There is no migration after the Conquest (of Mecca), but Jihad and sincere intention. When you are asked to set out (for the cause of Islam) you should set out.” (*Hadith*, 1083). Early in the rising period of Islam, some Muslim thinkers argued that “the ultimate goal of Islam is to turn the whole world into an Islamic area”. (Peng, S., 1997: 359). To a certain extent, this has contributed to the popularity of violent “Jihad” and migrant “Jihad”. 2) The theory of “individual Jihad” leads to the inwards retreat of “Jihad”. Some radical Muslim scholars issue a *fatwa*, and claim that the Jihad is a duty of each Muslim within their capability, which “makes the ‘Jihad’ an open market without borders that both individuals or organizations can easily access at any time” (Benotman, N., 2011: January 14). In the United States and Europe, there Jihad has been privatized, increasing the difficulty of anti-terrorism, especially causing significant impact on the international anti-terrorism cooperation. Religious extremism is rising in the globe in two directions: one is organized and scaled “Jihad led by organizations like Al-Qaeda and the IS; the other one is individual and small-scale Jihad that does not belong to any extremist organizations, resulting in tension in two directions – inwards and outwards.

Therefore, the formation of the has contributed to the rise of religious extremism globally. The fight between extremism and the “de-radicalization” is actually the game to compete for the right of religious discourse.

III. International Anti-Terrorism Cooperation: Prevent Religious Extremism through Sino-Arab Cooperation

Facing the real challenges posed by the rise of religious

extremism in the globe, no country could fight it alone. As an emerging power shouldering responsibility, China has its international responsibility of maintaining world peace and security and fighting against terrorism and extremism. At the same time, it suffers from violent incidents as well. Also, creating a safe environment along the “Belt and Road” is urgently needed. Therefore, China has gradually created its own “Chinese way” in the international counter-terrorism cooperation: 1) China promotes “cooperative security concept” of common security, comprehensive security, cooperative security and sustainable security. Put efforts on building security partnership system based on a community with common interests, shared interests and co-shouldered responsibility, so as to promote the new-type of international relationship with the core of win-win cooperation on many aspects including politics, economics, security and culture. (Xinhua, 2014: November 29). 2) China has formed a “multi-level international anti-terrorism cooperation system” (consisting of the UN, regional and sub-regional international organization platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, bilateral platforms such the one between China and Pakistan and domestic platforms), to carry out counter-terrorism cooperation through joint military drills, intelligence sharing, border controls, extradition of prisoners, cross-border pursuit for escapers, and financial monitoring, and to further strengthen the mechanism of construction of bilateral and multilateral security cooperation in effective cooperation practice; 3) through the establishment of National Security Commission and the establishment of the National Counterterrorism Intelligence Center, and the further strengthening of the counter-terrorism special forces, China will take a combination of measures in the fight and comprehensive control, in order to explore a new path for anti-terrorism in

Xinjiang, aiming at “strengthening the construction of counter-terrorism intelligence system, focusing on improving the ability to conduct early warning, prediction and prevention, thus to discover and deal with the most violent terrorist cases in the early stage; to strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries and key countries in anti-terrorism practice, to effectively contain and combat the Eastern Turkistan terrorist organization with the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement as the representative” (*Beijing Times*, 2016: February 27). 4) On December 27, 2015, China launched the “Counterterrorism Law” and put it into effect on January 1, 2016, which will improve the ability to fight terrorism, further increase efforts to fight against violence in accordance with the law, and persevere to promote the source governance, in order to strengthen the international anti-terrorism cooperation.

China and Arab countries can take the following measures in the prevention of religious extremism and cooperation in the field of “de-radicalization”:

First, adhere to a distinctive attitude that opposes and condemns all forms of terrorism, and reject the linking of terrorism with any religions or sectarian groups, and strive to play an important role in eradicating religious extremism. On January 13, 2016, the first *China’s Arab Policy Paper* was issued, which clearly sought to “explore cooperation in the field of de-radicalization, signaling that the Sino-Arab security cooperation had entered a new historical stage of jointly curbing the spread of extremism”. In January 2016, during President Xi’s visit to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Arab League headquarter, a series of “Joint Declaration” and speeches were published to lead the direction for new cooperation in the area of de-radicalization.

Second, enhance the consensus on de-radicalization in the construction of a “community of destiny” to create a good security

environment for the development of “comprehensive strategic partnership”. China should advocate building a consciousness of “community of destiny”; specifically, for the “Belt and Road”. A “sense of community for the Silk Road” includes not only the political, economic, security, cultural and other different aspects of the consciousness of “community of destiny”, but also the China strategy of equality, reciprocity, cooperation, and tolerance (Guo, J., 2015: May 18). Therefore, China should take advantage of the primary role of religions in promoting the cause of world peace, strengthening consensus of peace between Chinese religions and Arab religions. In addition, it should also strengthen bilateral cooperation on counter-terrorism, to further promote counter-terrorism consensus in intersection zones of the “Belt and Road”. In addition to a joint military drill, intelligence sharing, and extradition of suspects, Sino-Arab cooperation against terrorism should also strengthen multilateral counter-terrorism cooperation in regional and sub-regional organizations such as the platform of the Arab League, Muslim World League, Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Gulf Cooperation Council, especially to reach consensus on de-radicalization in security cooperation to jointly control the risk factors of religious extremism.

Third, further take advantage of elite resources of the religious leaders, scholars and entrepreneurs in promoting the practice of “heart-to-heart” civil relations to consolidate the foundation of public opinion in new areas of cooperation in de-radicalization. China should assign patriotic religious leaders with diplomatic sense, researchers with expertise and double-track diplomacy ability, and business leaders of the “going out” enterprises who are good at dealing with a variety of people in the society as the backbones to carry out cultural exchanges. The three teams’ participation in foreign cultural exchanges is not only a

realistic continuation of the humanity mode since the ancient Silk Road which were composed of travelers, scholars and believers, but also transfers the elite resources in academia, religions, and business into diplomatic resources. China should extend the efforts of cultural exchanges to all aspects of society, to cover the range of religions, ethnic groups, tribes, communities, families and mosques in cultural exchanges and cooperation, to lay a solid foundation of public opinion in countries along the Silk Road. Cultural diplomacy in Islamic countries along the Silk Road needs more patience and carefulness, so that Islamic factors can play a positive role in the development of bilateral and multilateral relations.

Fourth, carry out pragmatic cooperation between China and the Arab world in the interpretation of scripture based on further improvement of religious dialogue mechanism, laying the foundation for cooperation dialogue of “de-radicalization” cooperation between China and the Arab world. The new dialogue between Chinese and Arab civilizations along the Silk Road should also fully explore the potential of religious patriotic leaders in civilizations dialogue, and carry out extensive exchanges among religions, academia and media of countries along the Road, clearly distinguishing the religion from illegal and criminal activities that utilize religion or the banner of religion, and avoid linking extremism with specific religions and specific ethnic groups. The speech of President Xi in the Arab League also pointed out that China would “organize the exchange visit of 100 religious celebrities”, “strengthen Sino-Arab cyber security cooperation, and cut off the communication channels of violent terrorists, including audio and video networks” (Xi, J., 2016: January 22), in order to “escort” pragmatic cooperation in scripture interpretation between China and Arab countries.

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