



PRISLAMISM, RADICALIZATION AND DERADICALIZATION IN CANADA

Date: November 13, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On November 13, 2023, Professor Mubin Shaikh presented *Prislamism, Radicalization, and Deradicalization in Canada* at the West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were that Prislamism, thought of as a route to radicalization, is a blend of Islamic theory and concepts that advocates for violence toward institutions of incarceration. The prison systems in both Muslim and Western nations provide a breeding ground for radicalization through both their physical conditions and the social dynamics of custody. Combating radicalization in prisons requires robust training and a steadfast adherence to the law on the part of practitioners.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Islamic radicalization is a result not only of religious beliefs, but confused personal identities, a desire to enact change, and other psychosocial factors. This type of radicalization happens within communities as well as in prisons, where networks and conditions of confinement can exacerbate extremist schools of thought. This discussion covered ways to combat radicalization, including building strong communities and creating effective messaging.

BACKGROUND

Professor Shaikh began his presentation with a set of definitions to provide context to the audience. They are as follows:

Islam is a set of beliefs and actions extrapolated from the Quran and Sunnah by scholars from various schools of law. These beliefs and actions have emerged from the interpretive methodology of the earliest Muslims.

Islamism is a political ideology emerging from colonial contexts that holds a hostile approach to non-Muslim states and systems as well as sometimes against Muslims from other sects. The goal is to implement an authoritarian or fascistic government.

Prislamism is a pastiche of Islamic theory and concepts, applied in a custodial context and observed through chain of command. It advocates for violence toward institutions of incarceration as well as their staff while advocating for a release from custody.

As a means of illustrating the reasons some may be attracted to extremist thinking, Professor Shaikh quoted Islamic scholar Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad: “Those who come from Islam because they wish to draw closer to God have no problem with a multiform Islam radiating from a single revealed paradigmatic core. But those who come to Islam seeking an identity will find the multiplicity of traditional Muslim cultures intolerable. People with confused identities are attracted to totalitarian solutions.” Professor Shaikh suggested that, in terms of battling extremism, we must tackle the ideology that if a caliphate, or Muslim state, were to be established, it would solve all violent conflicts in the Muslim world.

Core grievances that lead to radicalization include the desecration of the Quran, Islam’s core document; insults to the prophet; and foreign occupancy and policies; however, even if all of these offenses were to disappear, it would not spell an end to Islamic extremism. In these cases, Professor Shaikh noted that ideology is not just a set of beliefs, but action-enabling ideas. He illustrated this point with another quote from an unnamed source, which said “Sometimes, ideology is a driver of violent extremism, but at other times, it’s just a passenger with other psychosocial factors at the wheel.” This quote helps explain people who become radicalized due to personal issues.

Responses to this type of radicalization include public and emergency communications such as positioning statements against extremism as well as forming meaningful connections with communities and grassroots support. This includes ensuring that Muslim and Islamist groups retain their autonomy to their own messaging, even when it’s not in line with western policies. Professor Shaikh noted that practitioners should make use of these tactics in a way that is lawful and measured but should also not be naive about the fact that many extremist groups will take advantage of the limits of the law that bind enforcers and practitioners.

Prislamism is commonly thought of as the “university of radicalization” and is informed by gangsterism. One of the early manifestations of this type of Islamism was demonstrated by the Group Islamique Armé, which was based in Algeria and active between 1993 and 2004. This group engaged in smuggling, drug trafficking, robbery and weapons trafficking. In the context of this group, the ends were justified by the means; this attitude is largely rejected in traditional Muslim societies—it is not widely accepted that one can commit haram to achieve halal. Notable members of this group include Djafar al-Afghani, a black marketeer whose networking skills and thuggery earned him his status as Emir of the group. Khalid Kelkal, another prominent member, was a Muslim who was converted to extremism during his stay in prison.

This prison-to-extremist pipeline is a common theme both in Muslim and Western countries, and the same path to radicalization can be seen in Al Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who engaged in petty crime before being sent to prison in 1992. There, he not only built a strong network but converted to Muslim extremism. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who was responsible for the 2015 Paris attacks, engaged in delinquency and drug use before being sent to prison, where his radical attitudes increased. He eventually joined ISIS in 2014 and returned to Belgium to engage with terror cells and plot terrorist attacks.

In examining the role of the prison system in radicalization, Professor Shaikh suggested that we must consider the conditions of custody, which can often amplify radical attitudes. These include poor building conditions that fail to meet core human needs, such as constantly buzzing fluorescent lights, which inhibit rest. They also include bureaucratic and institutional barriers to human services and the effects of solitary confinement on the human psyche.

The dynamics of custody, especially the relationships formed while in detention, can also contribute to radicalization, as the need for survival, identity and belonging can encourage segregation and the weaponization of faith-based identities. Relationships in custody can be transactional and coercive, sometimes enforced by violence. Finally, the ability to form networks with already-radicalized people can help solidify extremist thought processes. Steps that practitioners can take to combat this type of in-custody radicalization include modeling morally upright behavior, staying on top of regular training and maintaining their mental health.

Professor Shaikh stated that in Canada, there is an overrepresentation of Muslims in prisons and there are capacity-building issues when it comes to determining the organizations suitable for addressing in-custody radicalization and providing them with funding. Professor Shaikh quoted an anonymous resident of a

Canadian correctional facility, who said “You treat me like an animal on the inside, what are you telling me to be when I get out?”

Canada has several ISIS returnees among our general and prison population, including Mohammed Ali, Jack Letts, and several unknown women. Many of these people are subject to peace bonds but have not been charged with terrorism. According to Professor Shaikh, this sets a dangerous precedent where future offenders may not be discouraged from committing terrorist acts abroad.

Question and Answer

You expressed frustration with our inability to lay charges related to terrorism. What can we do differently to make current terrorism laws more effective?

This question raises another question of whether terrorism laws are even necessary considering we have laws against murder, attempted murder and conspiracy. Why, then, do we waste time with legal academics and discussions of motive? Professor Shaikh expressed frustration with this type of ineffectual discussion and asserted that we have pre-existing laws that can and should be applied in situations of terrorism.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Prislamism, thought of as a route to radicalization, is a pastiche of Islamic theory and concepts that advocates for violence toward institutions of incarceration as well as their staff while also advocating for a release from custody.
- The prison systems in both Muslim and Western nations provide a breeding ground for radicalization through both their physical conditions and the dynamics of custody.
- Combating radicalization in prisons requires robust training and a steadfast adherence to the law on the part of practitioners.
- Combating radicalization outside of prisons requires thoughtful public messaging, the formation of meaningful connections with communities and genuine grassroots support efforts.

FURTHER READING

- Shaikh, M. (2015). Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Online: An Anecdotal Case Study Related to Engaging ISIS Members and Sympathizers (from North America, Western Europe, and Australia) on Twitter. *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 98(4), 478–487. <https://doi.org/10.5325/soundings.98.4.0478>
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- Shaikh, M., & Bonino, S. (2016). In Conversation with Mubin Shaikh: From Salafi Jihadist to Undercover Agent inside the “Toronto 18” Terrorist Group. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(2), 61–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26297554>



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Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>

The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare
Volume 6, Issue 3