

Xenophobia, Islamophobia, Western Conspiracies and Manipulations: Turkish Official Explanations of Islamic State

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News

The Turkish government has in the last two years published three reports on Islamic State (IS), which reflect the official Turkish view on the rise of the organization and its religious views.

Summary

The article is an analysis of three reports on Islamic State (IS) published by the Turkish government. The analysis places the official Turkish approach in a wider international context and argues that the Turkish approach stresses the “push factors” when analyzing the motives of Muslims in the West. Moreover, the article documents that the official texts fundamentally blame the West for the rise of IS.

Key Words

Turkey, Islamic State, terrorism, violent jihadism

About the Author

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Analysis:

In international research on the motivations of young Muslims to sympathize with Islamic State (IS) there is an ongoing debate on two interrelated issues: The first question is, whether it is the “push factors” or the “pull factors” which play the most important role? Researchers who focus on the “push factors” refer to a number of negative phenomena such as racism, Islamophobia, socio-economic marginalization, unemployment and discrimination, especially in liberal democratic Western societies, and claim that these are the culprits which “push” some young Muslims into the ranks of IS. The “pull factors” mentioned most by those who subscribe to the alternative approach are the fascination with being a part of a new state project (the caliphate), taking revenge on the West for its colonial history, exploitation and humiliation of the Muslim lands, discontent with a number of principles of late modern society such as gender equality, democracy and secularism, and the ecstasy and warmth of being together with like-minded people around a religious and political project.¹

The second issue at stake is: Does Islam play a role in Islamist terrorism? Put in general terms: Can religious violence be explained at all without religion? This issue is much more controversial and creates a lot of heated debate.² One reason for this is basically political: Not many researchers or pundits want to be identified with the anti-Islamic line, which claims a direct and unmediated line between Islam and political violence. However, some scholars of Islam such as the British historian Michael Cook claim that Islam plays a larger role in contemporary politics than other religions, and that it is more likely that the Islamic heritage will be invoked by contemporary Muslims in their political life than the adherents of other religions. Cook says, “Obviously I take it for granted that it does make a difference whether your religious heritage is Islamic, Hindu or Christian ... It follows that I have no great sympathy with the idea that religious traditions are putty in the hand of exegetes – as if a heritage could successfully be interpreted to mean whatever one wanted and all interpretations were equally plausible to one’s fellow believers”.³ Cook and other like-minded scholars contend that fundamentalism, in the sense of a determination to return to the original sources of the religion, is politically more adaptive for Muslims than it is for followers of other

¹ Dawson, L. L., Amarasingam, A. & Bain, A. 2016: *Talking to Foreign Fighters: Socio-Economic Push versus Existential Pull Factors*. TSAS, Canadian network for research on terrorism, security and society no. 16-14.

² For an expose of this debate see Wood, Graeme 2017: *The Way of the Strangers. Encounters with the Islamic State*. London: Penguin Books.

³ Cook, Michael 2014: *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective*. Princeton: Princeton UP. In the Danish context see professor of Koranic Studies Hoffman, Thomas 2014: Mester Cook og islam (Master Cook and Islam). Weekendavisen, 27. juni.

religions. Finally, and most important in our context, they assert that that one cannot analyze religious terrorism by ignoring religion.⁴

Three Turkish reports

The Turkish government has in the last two years published three reports on IS (Diyanet 2015, 2016 and Ministry of Interior 2017)⁵. Diyanet, which published two of the reports, is The Directorate of Religious Affairs, Turkey's official religious ministry. The Turkish official line, which can be observed in these documents, is that while in the Western context it is the push factors which play the major role, it is the pull factors in the Turkish context.

According to Diyanet (2016), there are economic, political, sociological and cultural reasons for the fact that young Muslims “easily fall into the trap” of IS and similar organizations (p. 54). However, the report differentiates between the motives of young Muslims in Western societies on the one side and those in Muslim countries, especially in Turkey, on the other. While the push factors apparently drive the young Muslims in Europe towards violent jihad, the pull factors attract them in Muslim countries.

The report summarizes the development of violent jihadism among Muslims living in Western countries as follows: The Muslim workers, who came to Western societies as workers, were initially welcomed with tolerance; but when it became clear they were there to stay and they resisted assimilation, “an increasingly prejudiced attitude began to take shape against them” (p. 54). Moreover, the fact that the younger generations of Muslim minorities learned the language of the country they lived in and demanded their democratic rights “led to a resurgence of xenophobia and the birth and spread of Islamophobia in those countries” (p. 54). It was in this process that violent organizations such as IS directed their propaganda toward the Muslim youth in the Western countries, “who felt marginalized merely for being a Muslim or foreigner”, although they had been born and raised in these countries. Despite the obvious lack of integration, the Western countries did not do much to integrate the younger generations into society, continues the report. Moreover, the Western countries constructed two groups among the Muslim minorities as “the moderates” and “the radicals” and split them “with an arrogant and

⁴ 2017 Hoffmann, Thomas 2017: Islam for dummies. *Weekendavisen*, 2. juni.

⁵ *Diyanet 2015: DAIS'in Temel Felsefesi ve Dini Referanslari Raporu* (The Basic Philosophy and Religious References of Deash). Ankara: Diyanet; *Diyanet 2016: Religious Exploitation and Terrorist Organization ISIS*. Ankara: Diyanet; Interior Ministry of Turkey 2017: *Turkey's Fight Against DEASH*. July 2017. www.icisleri.gov.tr. Diyanet 2015 is only in Turkish. Both Diyanet 2016 and Ministry of Interior 2017 are bilingual.

imperious attitude”, and this discriminatory policy eventually drove Muslims into a “constant siege mentality” (p. 54) within the Western societies. The mass media played a not only pernicious but a major role in spreading this allegedly false differentiation. According to the report the young Muslims are “ostracized and scorned in Europe” (p. 56), and it was inevitable that these circumstances were going to cause identity crisis and a psychological sense of inferiority among Muslim youth. These youngsters have taken refuge in Islam as an ideology due to suffering a grave identity crisis. As a result, “ideas that call people to violence spread among Muslim youth” (p. 56).

One can see that the Diyanet report repeats the critique, which Western anti-racism has traditionally directed against European societies, with similar arguments and corresponding vocabulary such as: racism, assimilationism, disrespect, prejudice, xenophobia, Islamophobia, marginalization, discrimination, ostracization, scorn and humiliation. Thus, Muslim immigrants and their children are being presented as victims of Western societies.

The push factors in Turkey are not mentioned at all. The possible push factors such as widespread poverty, unemployment especially among the young, the large gap in incomes between social groups, and the increasing suppression of democratic rights by the government, especially since 2013, are not mentioned. It is apparently not realistic to expect such factors to be mentioned in a Turkish official document. However, two of IS’s diatribes against Turks and Turkey are mentioned in the Interior Ministry document. The first one is that IS depicts Turks and their relation to Islam as “heathens” and “apostates”. And the second is that Turkey holds regular elections, and the ministry report does not miss the chance to present Turkey as a democratic country: “The IS deems living and voting in a democratic country as infidelity.”

The (non)role of Islam

If we turn to pull-factors, they are mentioned in an indirect way. The reports have an equivocal position about the role of Islam and religious belief in motivating young Muslims in Turkey to join IS. On the one side, they claim that IS has nothing to do with Islam, but on the other side large parts of the reports are devoted to countering IS’s theological arguments. One wonders why the authors of the report bother to use theological arguments with quotations from the Koran and the hadith to refute its views if IS really has nothing to do with Islam.

Let’s look now at how this ambiguity manifests itself? On the one side, we are told that “(i)t is not right to consider IS a consequence and product of some sort of a religious

quest or an interpretation of Islam” (p. 55).⁶ The authors of the report obviously feel the need to substantiate this counter-intuitive claim and state that IS and similar organizations express themselves through a religious discourse, and make the utmost use of hadith and verses to back their arguments. “However”, insists the report, “religious discourse is a result and appearance rather than reason” (p. 55). We are led to understand that it is not so important that they use religious references. Moreover, the report claims that it is “inevitable” (p. 55) that the current international conditions will bring about similar violent movements. We are told that “only by eliminating the injustice could we be able to clear away Daesh and similar organizations”, since they are “products of the modern era, the unjust conditions, and the specific international factors” (p. 55). According to the report, IS and violent organizations are using Islamic rhetoric only because the conditions in question have manifested themselves in the most dramatic fashion in the Muslim countries. If a similar situation had occurred in India or China, Indians and Chinese would have probably adopted respectively a Hindu and Confucian inspired rhetoric, claims the report (p. 55).

The report seems to explain away terrorism as an inevitable consequence of Western or local oppression and exploitation. Many would agree that oppression and exploitation will eventually lead to different forms of resistance and struggle, but the claim that they *inevitably* lead to terrorism is not elaborated and substantiated. The report suffices with speculation about which narratives the Indians and the Chinese would use, but glosses over the historical fact that the main anticolonial figure in the Indian context, Gandhi, did not adopt a violent line as IS and the like do now. It seems as if the report reduces the role of Islam and IS’s particular interpretations of Islamic texts merely to result and to appearances, i.e., to a passive role and aesthetics as well as grandiloquent rhetoric (p. 55).

Diyamet (2016) stresses emphatically the notion that IS does not in any way stem from “Islam’s own dynamics” (p. 56). However, the report still aims at presenting a “scholarly analysis demonstrating that the organization does not rely on a consistent method to obtain religious knowledge” (p. 56). Therefore, the report’s aim is to analyze “the narratives produced by IS in the field of faith and deed and their acts in practice” (p. 56). The authors promise that this analysis will be carried out “in light of traditional and modern scientific approaches” (p. 56). We can again ask: If IS has nothing to do Islam, why bother with all this effort?

⁶ This point is put forward more bluntly in the Interior Ministry (2017): IS’s “deviant understanding on religion has nothing to do with Islam or the culture of the region” (p. 5).

The whole report is a theological rejection of IS's ideas. The main critique directed against IS is that its ideology is based on "political Salafism", and therefore, claims the report, a refutation of IS's religious narrative "should actually start with standing to the challenge caused by this back-to-basics salafi approach" (p. 92). The report emphasizes that the problem with IS is not the lack of religious knowledge based on authentic sources, but a knowledge that is "distorted" and "turned into dogma" (p. 94).

IS is criticized for "lacking any methodology" in its religious approach (p. 59), having "shallow and inadequate fiqh practices", having a literalist approach to religious texts, being arbitrary and eclectic in choosing sentences from sacred texts (p. 59-69) and instrumentalizing religion for political ends (p. 69). "Consequently", the report concludes, "an introverted organization that does not make healthy use of accurate sources is a convenient place for tendency to violence (p. 61).

Conspiracies, manipulations and self-critique

Besides blaming xenophobia and islamophobia in the West for pushing young Muslims into the arms of IS, Diyanet⁷ blames also, at least partly, the West and its colonial policies in the Middle East. It underlines the role of the US occupation of Iraq and the suppressive policies of the governments in Bagdad and Damascus against the Sunni Arabs in creating fertile ground for IS.

It also argues that "conspiracies and manipulations" by colonial forces, which want to protect their economic interests in the region and weaken the unity of Muslims, are at play in intentionally creating and directing IS (p. 26-7). This conspiracy theory, according to the liberal Muslim pundit Mustafa Akyol⁸, is very common in Turkey when it comes to explaining IS, especially in the pro-government media.⁹ Yet, the report still also calls for self-criticism among Muslims:

"Despite all external factors, conspiracies and manipulation, the nation of Islam must focus on the internal reasons of this fact and take the issue of Daesh¹⁰ upon itself. The

⁷ Diyanet 2015: 26.

⁸ Akyol, Mustafa 2015: Turkey takes on the Islamic State in 40-page report. *Al-Monitor*, 2. September.

⁹ This point is also claimed in the report of the Interior Ministry (2017): "(IS') procurement of services from the engineers of the (Western) countries in technical issues all reveal the fact that its true identity cannot be associated with Islam at all" (p. 5).

¹⁰ The Diyanet uses the term Deash, which is the Arabic equivalent of the English acronym ISIS and Turkish ISID. The latter is in fact the most commonly used term in Turkey, but the Turkish government has opted for Deash, probably to avoid repeating a reference to Islam.

case of Daesh and similar ‘takfiri’¹¹ tendencies cannot be dismissed merely as a ‘conspiracy of foreign powers.’ Even if it is indeed a conspiracy, we should ask ourselves, ‘Don’t we have any flaws that allow the making of this conspiracy?’¹²

Diyanet’s 2015 report was both welcomed and criticized by Mustafa Akyol and another prominent modernist intellectual, Caner Taslaman. They both stated that it “fails to address some of the roots of IS militancy in mainstream Sunni Islam,” such as the idea that apostates deserve to be killed. They demanded that Turkey’s religious opposition to IS ideology should be deeper and braver.

Akyol claims that the problem lies not only in IS ideology, but in the way all mainstream Sunni authorities think. “For as extreme as it is”, he notes, “IS indeed refers to some troubling verdicts in mainstream Islamic law, as is clearly seen with the verdict on apostates”.¹³ He reminds us that IS condemns as "apostates" all Muslims who stand in its way and sometimes kills them. He concedes that IS’s takfiri zeal is denounced by almost all Sunni authorities, who underline that one cannot so easily condemn other Muslims as infidels. “But”, adds Akyol, “the very idea that apostates deserve the death penalty is rarely questioned”. Moreover, he thinks a more detailed refutation of not only IS “but all groups and regimes that employ violence and repression in the name of Islam is sorely needed”.

The official Turkish documents show a clear ideological tendency in their analysis of IS and similar violent jihadi groups and their followers: blaming fundamentally the West for the problems of the Muslim communities in Western societies and in Muslim countries. As the liberal democratic and modernist Muslim intellectuals point out, it is not clear whether this approach is any help in tackling the challenges Muslims face both in the West and in their home countries.

¹¹ A takfiri is a Muslim who accuses another Muslim of apostasy.

www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2319

¹² Diyanet 2015: 26-7. Mustafa Akyol’s translation.

¹³ Akyol 2015.