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FIGHTING AGAINST RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA- THE PILLAR FOR A SUSTAINABLE HARMONY BETWEEN WEST AND ISLAM

Case study

Keywords

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Terrorism
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Abstract

The paper is intending to reveal once again that the importance of religion to the Muslim world and the importance of freedom of speech in the Western world increased. The paper mentions the contributions of states and worldwide organizations in order to decrease and even to eliminate, if it will be possible, the phenomenon of extremism for both parties. The extremism leads all states and organizations to strengthen the efforts done in the sense of decreasing the dimensions of this phenomenon and to prevent happening of events similar with those from 9/11. Extremists exist unfortunately worldwide, whether referring to the religion or secular ideologies.

Introduction

It became a reality that globalization in all its forms – political, cultural, economic, military... – is an exclusive tendency with effects through the lives of people from worldwide. The concept of globalization is very used nowadays and became even a fashionable one in social and cultural studies, and as an effect, its meaning became fuzzy. This is the reason for explaining why globalization has to be considered through the all socio-cultural processes that have a contribution to make distance irrelevant. The complex phenomenon of globalization has important economic, political and cultural dimensions, as well as significant ethical implications. Generally, global processes affect the conditions of people who live in particular places and creating new opportunities and new forms of vulnerability. In the era of the nuclear bomb, transnational terrorism and potential ecological disasters, risks have to be globally shared.

Through my paper I will analyze the phenomenon of extremism that involved both parties, Christians and Muslims, but I will talk much about extremism against Islam and dimensions of Islamophobia.

I will discuss about Islamophobia because of the events that happened worldwide and because observing its dimensions rapidly increased.

Literature review regarding the phenomenon of extremism

The idea of the political extreme has its roots in the ancient Greek ethics of moderation. Within each action case there exists a midpoint (mesotes) between the too-great (hyperbole) and the too-little (elleipsis), a difference or a normal gap between the excessive and the moderate (Backes 2006). A complex system of terminological terms is found in the middle and the late writings of Plato.

Plato gathered the ethics of moderation with constitutional doctrine.

His continuum of governmental form extended the extremes of despoteia/tyrannis and anomia/lawless democracy (in the sense of mob rule). Oligarchy, basileia (kingdom), aristocracy and legal democracy were placed between extremes. The mean (meson), that guarantee both moderation (metrion) and virtue (arete), has its origins or roots through the mix (meikte) and balancing of constitutional elements which, considered separately, would be harmful (kakon) and extreme (akron). The ontological phenomenological feature of the differentiation of the forms of government was linked in this way to the normative axiological feature of the mesotes doctrine (Aalders 1968; Krämer 1959; Nippel 1980).

Aristotle liberated the Platonic concepts from their theological, ontological pattern, embedded them in a comprehensive scientific system and gave them a politically realistic dimension.

The “ism” contained by the word that became a large phenomenon - “extremism”, entered into the political language in numerous ways, without at first establishing itself in its own enduring terminological category. This has applicability to its appearance during the age of religious wars (Stephen Gardiner, bishop of Winchester resembled the partisans of a radical reformation with the “new scoole of extremites” [Gardiner 1546]) as well as to its introduction into the terminology of the German “Vormärz” (the liberal philosopher Wilhelm Traugott Krug introduced the term “Extremisten” as a synonym for “Ultraisten” [Krug 1838]). In both cases, the times were characterized by political polarization, in which traditional words and expressions did not seem to satisfy to describe a phenomenon understood as an existential danger. This had applicability even in the case of the Russian Revolution of 1917, which was the cause for the term “extremism” establishing itself permanently – at first in the Western states – in the political

language. In France and England, “extremism” became a catch-phrase which firstly defined a fear of the looming separate peace more than fear of the consequences of the political radicalism of the Bolsheviks. For a period, “extremism” was confused or assimilated with the concept of the “extreme left” yet was extended to the new formation of the “extreme right” – fascism – after the “March on Rome”. Also, the term regained the comparative perspective of the Platonic-Aristotelian meanings. Spiritual isomorphies of the extremes had already been developed by liberal observers such as Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant during the first few years following the French Revolution (Backes 2006: 106). In the 19th century, it had become customary to parallel the extremes of the political spectrum from reward point of constitutionalism and, aside from the obvious differences, to develop the analogies and structural similar features. Controversies were sparked by the comparative dimension linked to the term extremism when it was introduced into scientific discussion in the 1920s. As the history of terminology shows, those who speak about “extremes” and “extremism” which in the framework of a scientific terminology must de-contextualize the terms to a certain level to free them from their changing historical contents – unless relativity has been established as the central content.

Islamophobia – defining and exemplifying

Oxford Dictionary defines the term “islamophobia” as *a hatred or fear of Islam or Muslims, especially as a political force*. Collins Dictionary comes with a similar definition for the concept of “islamophobia”, hatred or fear of Muslims or of their politics or culture.

“Islamophobia is a contemporary form of racism and xenophobia motivated by unfounded fear, mistrust,

and hatred of Muslims and Islam. Islamophobia is also manifested through intolerance, discrimination, unequal treatment, prejudice, stereotyping, hostility, and adverse public discourse. Differentiating from classical racism and xenophobia, Islamophobia is mainly based on stigmatization of a religion and its followers, and as such, Islamophobia is an affront to the human rights and dignity of Muslims.”

Six of the containing terms of the definition above are “built”, in the sense that they are either of recent coinage or have recently acquired new meanings, and are commonly used to demonize, intimidate, and marginalize people who hold certain political opinions. These words are controversial, and thus should not be used in any official definition without themselves being defined: *Racism, Xenophobia, Intolerance, Discrimination, Prejudice, Stereotyping*.

Islamophobia existed in premise before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, but it increased in frequency and notoriety during the past decade. The Runnymede Trust in the U.K., for example, identified eight components of Islamophobia in a 1997 report, and then produced a follow-up report in 2004 after 9/11 and the initial years of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. The second report found the aftermath of the terrorist attacks had made life more difficult for British Muslims.

“Islamophobia” was not recorded in English until much later, and may well have been an independent coinage rather than a translation from the French. By the time it gained currency in English, the meaning had shifted to be more or less the one we all know today. Its use became more extensive in the late 1980s, in the wake of the Iranian fatwa against Salman Rushdie over his book *The Satanic Verses*: *The term Islamophobia seemed to first appear in Britain during the Rushdie affair in the late 1980’s. This was an attempt by fundamentalist Muslims to silence critics*

such as Rushdie and his supporters for free speech by arguing that only the wider 'Islamophobia' of British society and state allowed this to pass unpunished. The implication was clear: criticism of Islam is tantamount to 'Islamophobia' and is therefore out of bounds.

As the British sociologist Chris Allen later wrote, *"However both the [Runnymede] report and its model have failed to stand the test of time and a detailed analysis highlights a number of serious flaws. The most obvious disadvantage of the term is that it is understood to be a 'phobia'. As phobias are irrational, such an accusation makes people defensive and defiant, in turn making reflective dialogue all but impossible. ... the instruments we have to define, identify and explain it neither measure up to the theory nor are they entirely bias-free.*

Thus the definition of the word "Islamophobia" is ambiguous, and any proof of the existence of the condition it describes is difficult or impossible to obtain. Nevertheless, the word has gained widespread currency, appearing more and more frequently over the last decade.

In December 2004, then-Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, speaking at a seminar entitled "Confronting Islamophobia" in New York, referred to Islamophobia as an "increasingly widespread bigotry". The Organization of the Islamic Conference (now the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, OIC) established an "Islamophobia Observatory" in 2007, and it has been issuing reports annually ever since. In April 2012 the OIC inaugurated a TV channel in order to counter Islamophobia.

In May 2013, Dr. Hatem Bazian, the director of the Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project at UC Berkeley Center for Race and Gender, wrote: *Thus, the crime of the terrorist is immediate, while that of the Islamophobes is long-lasting, for it creates and impresses on our*

collective public mind the logic of hate and racism that is then packaged to further justify the logic of "clash of ignorance" that is foundational to their [Sudden Ignorance] Syndrome.

Islamophobia is a strained fear or prejudice provoked by the existing Eurocentric and Orientalist global power structure. It is led at a perceived or real Muslim threat through the maintenance and extension of existing gaps in economic, political, social and cultural relations, while rationalizing the necessity to deploy violence as a tool to achieve "civilizational rehab" of the target communities .

Exemplifying Islamophobia events—movies, cartoons, media and books

An example of Islamophobia is that when Islam is presented as inferior to the West, sometimes barbaric, violent, aggressive, threatening and supportive for terrorist events in the media and some books.

The following statements appeared in media are obviously assimilated with this phenomenon that unfortunately increased rapidly:

- A more mundane reason for Islamophobia , in my opinion, lies in a psychology of alienation or 'strangeness'. (George Carey KNOW THE TRUTH (2004))
- He first proposed such a ban as part of the 2001 anti-terrorism legislation, ostensibly to protect Muslims from Islamophobia. (SPIKED (2004))
- Muslim groups have predictably criticised the rise, saying it shows prejudice and 'Islamophobia. SUN, NEWS OF THE WORLD (2004)
- The report says that Islamophobia is exacerbated by a high proportion of refugees and asylum-seekers being Muslims. (TIMES, SUNDAY TIMES (2004))

Elizabeth Pool in her book named Reporting Islam discussed about representation of Muslims and Islam in the Media, referring to the British Media. She

underlined that since the end of Cold War, much media attention has focused on Islam as a disturbance in the Global order. Her work shows how Muslims are demonized by the Media.

Another example is represented by Jack G. Shaheen, professor of Mass Communication at Southern Illinois University, who has published a book named "Arab TV" in 1984 and addressed stereotypical images of Arab Muslims. He researched over 100 different popular entertainment programs, cartoons and major documentaries telecast on network, independent and public channels, about 200 episodes during 8 years, which have connections to Arabs. He found that not a single positive image of them was shown. Television seems to lead, to perpetuate four basic myths about Arabs: They are all extremely wealthy; they are barbaric and uncultured; they are sex maniacs; and enjoy committing terrorism.

A study realized by two nonprofit journalism organizations concluded that President Bush and top administration officials issued hundreds of false statements about the national security threat from Iraq in the two years following the 2001 terrorist attacks. The study revealed that the statements "were part of an orchestrated campaign that effectively galvanized public opinion and, in the process, led the nation to war under decidedly false pretences."

In a 2011 meeting, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, as well as the League of Arab States, a key partner, identified Islamophobia as a significant area of concern. Gallup developed a specific set of analyses, considering the measurement of public opinions of majority and minority groups in multiple countries, to guide policymakers in their efforts to solve the global issue of Islamophobia.

According to this research ordered by Centre for Public Integrity, the U.S. identified more than 160 Muslim-American terrorist suspects and

perpetrators in the decade since 9/11, just a percentage of the thousands of acts of violence that occur in the United States each year. It is from this overall collection of violence that "an efficient system of government prosecution and media coverage brings Muslim-American terrorism suspects to national attention, creating the impression - perhaps unintentionally - that Muslim-American terrorism is more prevalent than it really is."

Another example is represented by a short film titled *Fitna* made by the Dutch politician and leader of the Party for Freedom, Geert Wilders, movie that showed a partial view of Islam and the misbehaviours of false Muslims. It generalized those acts to all Muslims. Geert Wilders, who is the leader of the most popular political party in the Netherlands, was himself involved in a case of Islamophobia. He is often characterized as an "Islamophobe", and his speeches and writings are widely considered adverse to Islam.

Efforts for the establishment of the harmony between the two parties, between West and Islam

A large number of countries use diplomacy to foster peaceful relations between the two civilizations, through dialogue among cultures and civilizations. Likewise, the UNESCO and other cultural organizations, as well as the media and the publishing houses carry out a powerful intellectual work to confirm this dialogue among civilizations and to protect cultural diversity.

Dialogue among civilizations is the compulsory result of this conflict, always aggressive, between the international society's imperialism, hegemony and injustice, on the one hand, and the self-preservation reflex that sometimes tend to violence, on the other hand.

As an example of its widespread usage, consider "Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and

Discrimination against Muslims: Addressing Islamophobia through Education”, published jointly by **OSCE/ODIHR**, the **Council of Europe**, and **UNESCO** in 2011. The document contains 49 instances of the word “Islamophobia” (including those used in footnotes and cited URLs), yet the closest it comes to a definition of the term is this brief description found on page 17: “*‘Islamophobia’, a term which is widely used by NGOs and frequently appears in the media, tends to denote fear, hatred or prejudice against Islam and Muslims.*”

The above statement does not qualify as a usable definition of “Islamophobia”, yet surprisingly, the concept forms the basis for an official OSCE guideline book. It is not appropriate that an undefined term is used as basis for educational guidelines, especially when the topic debated is controversial. At the Supplementary Human Dimension meeting in Vienna on July 12, 2013, as an answer to the repeated use of the term “Islamophobia” during various OSCE proceedings, Mission Europa Netzwerk Karl Martell requested a definition of the word.

UNESCO’s Interreligious Dialogue programme, an essential component of Intercultural Dialogue, intends to promote dialogue among different religions, spiritual and humanistic traditions in a world where conflicts, unfortunately, are increasingly associated with religious belonging.

It contains the reciprocal interactions and effects between, on the one hand, religions, spiritual and humanistic traditions, and on the other, the need to promote understanding between them in order to challenge ignorance and prejudices and promote mutual respect. Learning the art of dialogue represents both a personal and social process. Developing one’s skills and capacity for dialogue engages a willingness to be open while retaining one’s analytical judgment. Dialogue concerns us all: from decision-

makers and leaders to individuals within each community organization. Alongside relevant international conferences to raise awareness, UNESCO strives to promote grass-root activities, particularly in sensitive geo-strategically areas that reach target-populations such as women, youth and marginalized populations.

The **Organization of the Islamic Conference** (now the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, OIC) established an “Islamophobia Observatory” in 2007, and it has been issuing reports annually ever since. In April 2012 the OIC inaugurated a TV channel to counter the complex phenomenon of Islamophobia.

To decrease the dimensions of the Islamic Extremism, the Government of Saudi Arabia undertook domestic and religious reforms; legal, regulatory and political reforms. As part of these efforts, the government of Saudi Arabia adopted and applied domestic educational and religious reform efforts. These efforts were strengthened by the ones done by Ministry of Islamic Affairs, that implemented a 3-year enlightenment program in Saudi Arabia to educate imams, monitor mosques and purge extremism and intolerance from religious education.

Other effort is represented by the fact that the government of Saudi Arabia had found after an audit that 5 percent of school textbooks and curriculum guides contained “possibly offensive language”, and therefore, a program was put into practice in order to eliminate such material from schools. The Saudi Arabia’s Government continues its efforts in order to ensure that the new curriculum focuses more on fostering understanding among cultures, humanity and tolerance.

A significant importance has the effort of Saudi Government in the sense of implementing some political reforms, including reforms related to Islamic extremism. Its effect is represented by the establishment of the National Human Rights Association in March 2004 with a well defined aim to monitor the

implementation of international human rights commitments and maybe most important effect, the establishment of the King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue in August 2003 to bring together leaders to discuss issues such as education, extremism, the role of women, intercultural dialogue and problems facing the youth. The most important element of these reforms adopted by Saudi Government is the existence of King Abdulaziz Center from Vienna with its three initiatives, from Makkah, Madrid and New York, that come once again to strengthen the efforts in order to establish the harmony between two parties. The Makkah Declaration revealed once again that Islam has effective solutions for a time when world is facing crises and that the Muslim Nation is invited, with its entire cultural and indispensable legacy, to contribute its share alongside others. The Declaration underlies the idea that just a true and thoughtful dialogue exploiting humanly shared values is necessary for a joint action, which can face up to contemporary problems and protect humanity from their ill effects. One of the ideas underlined within Madrid Declaration is the one of the unity of humankind and its origin, as well as the equality of all peoples regardless of their colours, races and cultures. The New York Declaration summarizes that participating states affirmed their rejection of the use of religion to justify the killing of innocent people and actions of terrorism, violence and coercion, which directly contradict the commitment of all religions to peace, justice and equality.

Other significant effort done by the Saudi Government is proved by the existence of Mohammed Bin Naif Counseling and Care Center that is considered a correctional rehabilitation institution intended to develop knowledge and behavioural skills through a set of programs delivered by advisors specialized in different areas of related sciences. Having Intellectual security as its main

thrust, the Centre is entirely intended to reach a Society that is characterized by moderateness in both thoughts and behaviour.

European governments are involved in the issue of the relationship between intercultural dialogue, human rights and citizenship issues, too. Also, in the Paris Declaration in 2008, Heads of State and Government of the 43 participating Countries have emphasized “their commitment to strengthen democracy and political pluralism by the expansion of participation in political life and the embracing of all human rights and fundamental freedoms”, an engagement which was renewed six months later in the Marseille Final Statement (2008).

Conclusion

We live in an era when the same Coca-Cola commercials are shown with minimal local variations at worldwide cinemas, Harry Potter volumes are frequent wherever libraries are, and so on. Investment in human capital, military power and world literature are being dislodged from the barriers of space and this explains why they no longer belong to a particular place.

“ In the period post 9/11, a new debate has impinged on the public sphere: religion no longer flies below the cultural radar of the West. As Martin Amis notes, it is the “second plane” that was significant in the attacks of World Trade Centre, and, whatever the contested account might be of how the planes disappeared from air traffic control radar that day, the metaphor stands: religion has created that blip on the screen of culture that has returned it, if not centre-stage, then at least as a legitimate topic within popular culture”. (King, Mike, 2009)

Recently, previous Prime-Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair, concluded some important statements regarding the topic my paper discusses.”We must encourage education and tolerance if we are to bring about

peace in the Middle East and the rest of the world... The fact is that, though of course there are individual grievances or reasons for the violence in each country, there is one thing self-evidently in common: the acts of terrorism are perpetrated by people motivated by an abuse of religion. It is a perversion of faith. But there is no doubt that those who commit the violence often do so by reference to their faith and the sectarian nature of the conflict is a sectarianism based on religion. There is no doubt either that this phenomenon is growing, not abating. ...So the challenge is clear. And it is one that could define the nature of peace and conflict in the first half of the 21st century. The battles of this century are less likely to be the product of extreme political ideology – like those of the 20th century – but they could easily be fought around the questions of cultural or religious difference.”(Tony Blair, *The Guardian*, 24th of January, 2014)

Especially with regard to the revolution of information technology and its direct impact on everyone and the importance of freedom of opinion and expression for the West vis-a-vis what it means religion and His Messenger, and symbols for Muslims there is a need to search and find for new ideas taking into consideration the speed of the flow of information and its effects, and the significance of the exchange interests between the people.

Therefore, it should be on both sides to work to re-examine what can be done to calm the conflict . Muslims should rework some of the concepts and rhetoric that calls for hatred and develop new curricula, dissemination of the teachings of Islam which calls for tolerance in dealing with the other.

On the other hand, for the West should reconsider the boundaries of freedoms that influence human dignity and religion. Accomplish laws and penalties to reduce them. Especially intake of the media in all forms of hatred and Islamophobia .

Specific for the period we live is the fact that ideas and values associated with human rights spread from the top of educated hierarchies or elites worldwide to villagers and farmers in areas which until recently seemed both remote and exotic to Western eye. The accelerated diffusion of human rights ideas represents, in fact, probably one of the most impressive successes of globalization.

According to **UNESCO**, three - quarters of the world’s major conflicts have a cultural dimension. As it concludes, bridging the gap between cultures became an imperative, it is urgent and necessary for having peace, stability and development.

We are facing a situation with two sides, on one side there is the Western world with its freedom of expression, on the other side there is the Orient with its Islam religion. The problem arises from misunderstanding what is important for the other. For Westerns society its freedom of expression is very important while for Arab society its religion is on top of everything.

We live in the era of globalization, and with today's media, it takes not more than 5 minutes for information to circle the world. When something happens in a place, or something is said publicly in a city anywhere on this planet, the echoes will reach quickly other places, counties or cultures. The freedom of expression and freedom of the media will impact not only on a local level but also world widely. Not understanding that piece of information can lead to hatred, violence, labelling, Islamophobia. Here a very good example is what happened with the Danish caricatures, which provoked a wave of anti-Western hysteria in the Muslim world. Former Minister of Interior, Nicholas Sarkozy, came publicly saying that "the exaggeration of cartoons is better than the exaggeration of monopoly" or that is good to be "against any frame of censorship". The paradox is that freedom of expression here comes with negative consequences.

In order to diminish this gap between the two sides measures should be taken, we should brain storm for new ideas, for new thoughts. There should be a common ground for the two sides, both sides should understand that whatever they do or say is not limited to their country.

Tolerance is the key word for both sides, respecting the other and taking into consideration the differences before any act of any kind. There is a strong need to change mentalities, one cannot close the boundaries to its own society.

Why is the religion so important for Muslims? Because there is no freedom against the religion. Religion is within the constitution, which means there should be no freedom in the world to destroy their constitution, doing so is like calling the West to destroy their democracy. It's a must for the system to protect from any aggression the religion in the name of freedom. Any aggression against religion is an aggression against their democracy.

So, both parties have to work together to fight extremism, terrorism,

Islamophobia, spread of hatred or any kind of labelling and stereotypes.

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