

# Parallels Between Far-Right and Muslim Religious Ideological Extremism:

Methods, Push and Pull  
Factors, and Ideology

Issue Brief:  
**November 2018**



مبادرة طابة للدراسات المستقبلية  
TABAH FUTURES INITIATIVE



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# Executive Summary

This report examines the parallels and similarities between far-right and Muslim religious ideological extremism. The purpose of this analysis is to challenge the notion that Muslim religious ideological extremism poses the primary global threat to peace and security, as well as to demonstrate that critical and informed understandings for countering violent extremism (CVE) need to be holistic in nature, taking into consideration the variant strands and facets of extremism. Through exploring similarities in methods, push and pull factors and ideologies, this report demonstrates that violent extremism is not simply a religious or cultural issue, but rather that it is forged by geo-political-historical realities. Religion has been used as a justification for extremist thought and actions across the globe for many centuries, however, extremism thrives under certain social and political conditions not necessarily related to religious theologies. Until these realities are addressed within CVE initiatives, such initiatives will be inadequate and ineffectual.

# Introduction

There is a common perception pervasive in contemporary public, media and political discourse, which asserts that Muslim religious extremism is the greatest contributor to current levels of terrorism globally. Such claims are tenuous and distort the reality of contemporary terrorist threats. According to Europol, less than two per cent of all terrorist acts across Europe from 2009 to 2013 were religiously motivated <sup>1</sup>. The vast majority of these attacks were committed by non-Muslim separatist groups based in Europe. Similarly, in the United States, studies conducted by the FBI have found that only six per cent of terrorist attacks from 1980 to 2005 were committed by Muslims <sup>2</sup>. A more recent study in the US found that from 2008 to 2016 the number of domestic terrorist acts by non-Muslim far-right extremist groups represented more than double those of Muslim extremists <sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, from 2011 to 2016 only twelve per cent of terrorist attacks in the US were committed by people identifying themselves as Muslims, more than half of the attacks during this period were committed by white supremacists, neo-Nazis and other far-right groups <sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, studies suggest that terrorist activities committed by Muslims in the US, on average, receive 449 per cent more media coverage than other attacks <sup>5</sup>.

This research report is a comparative analysis of far-right extremism and Muslim religious ideological extremism focusing on methods, push and pull factors, and ideologies. The purpose of engaging in this analysis is to bring to light the fallacy that Muslim religious ideological extremism constitutes the primary global threat to peace and security. Additionally, this report will demonstrate that any critical and informed understanding for countering violent extremism (CVE) needs to be holistic in nature, taking into consideration the various forms and expressions of extremist thought and not focusing solely on Muslim religious ideological extremism.

Drawing parallels in methods, in this analysis, refers to identifying similarities in tactics, specifically looking at the types of violence employed and how this violence is enacted by both groups – far-right and Muslim religious ideological extremists. Push and pull factors in this report denote factors which push individuals into adopting extremist ideologies, as well as issues which make engaging in violent extremist activism an appealing choice. This report will also examine how these forms of extremism are similar ideologically. As such, this report will explain how some of the ideological formations of these extremist strands of thought are grounded in similar beliefs and worldviews, producing competing, yet complementary narratives. Far-right extremism in this analysis refers to extremist thought characterised by

1 - Beenish Ahmed, Think Progress (2015, January 8). Retrieved from Think Progress: <https://thinkprogress.org/less-than-2-percent-of-terrorist-attacks-in-the-e-u-are-religiously-motivated-cec7d8ebedf6/>

2 - FBI, FBI: Reports and publications (2005, December). Retrieved April 15, 2014, from FBI website: [http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/terrorism-2002-2005/terror02\\_05#forward](http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/terrorism-2002-2005/terror02_05#forward)

3 - David Neiwert, Reveal News: Article (2017, June 21). Retrieved from Reveal News: <https://www.revealnews.org/article/home-is-where-the-hate-is>

4 - Erin Kearns, Allison Betus & Anthony Lemieux, Why do some terrorist attacks receive more media attention than others? (Atlanta: Georgia State University, 2017).

5 - Ibid.

ultraconservatism, nativism and authoritarianism, and composed of individuals who align themselves with far-right politics. This entails a resistance to egalitarianism and supporting traditional social hierarchies, which oppose socialism and liberalism. Muslim religious ideological extremism refers to Muslims who espouse views that promote takfiri ideology. Takfiri ideology is characterised by harsh literalist interpretations of Islam, which pronounce apostasy and disbelief against Muslims who embrace differing interpretations on religious matters, thus justifying the shedding of their blood <sup>6</sup>. Through takfiri ideology, terrorist organisations such as al-Qaida and ISIS have legitimised the murder of Muslims and other religious groups who oppose them.

## Parallels between Far-Right and Muslim Religious Ideological Extremism

### Methods.

The most basic methodological similarity between the far-right and Muslim religious ideological extremist groups is the use of violence as a means of accomplishing one's goals. Far-right and Islamist groups most often have male perpetrators of violence. The intended use of violence by far-right and Islamist extremist groups is to murder individuals and to maximise fatalities. Muslim religious ideological extremists have used a range of tactics when engaging in violent extremist activities. These include detonating explosives, using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombings. However, in the US, some Muslim religious extremists have resorted to mass-shootings, such as Nidal Hasan, who was responsible for the Fort Hood Shooting (2009); Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, the couple who engaged in the San Bernardino Attack (2015); and Omar Mateen, who committed a mass-shooting at an Orlando nightclub (2016). Far-right extremist groups and individuals have also used bombings, IEDs, and mass-shootings in terrorist attacks. Increasingly these acts of violence are committed by 'lone wolf' radicalised individuals.

'Lone wolf terrorism' is a term that denotes acts of terrorism carried out by lone individuals, who are not formally members of organised terrorist groups. These individuals conceive of their plots independently and do not receive direct orders through a hierarchical chain of command. This form of terrorist activity has become increasingly common among far-right and Muslim religious extremists <sup>7</sup>.

6 - Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-jihadism: The history of an idea*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

7 - Steven Chermak & Jeffery Gruenewald, "Laying a foundation for the criminological examination of right-wing, left-wing, and al Qaeda-inspired extremism in the United States" *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27(1), (2015), 133-159.

Lone wolf acts of violence and terrorism among far-right extremists, particularly among white supremacists, became more common through the notion of 'leaderless resistance', promoted by Louis Beam, a white supremacist and member of the Ku Klux Klan, in the 1980s. A leaderless resistance strategy is a type of lone wolf operation in which an individual, or a very small, highly cohesive group, engages in acts of anti-state violence independent of any movement, leader or network of support. This approach was promoted as a means to evade law enforcement agencies by encouraging individuals or groups to operate independently of each other, and not to report to a central headquarters or a single leader for direction or instruction. According to the US State Department of Homeland Security, lone wolf activism from individuals embracing far-right ideologies currently poses the most dangerous domestic terrorism threat to the US <sup>8</sup>. This form of terrorist activity has also been encouraged by Muslim religious ideological extremists.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, former leader of the al-Qaida affiliate in Iraq, which eventually became ISIS, was strongly influenced by the jihadi ideologue, Abu Musab al-Suri. Al-Suri had published a 1,600 page book entitled a Call to a Global Islamic Resistance. This work strongly advocated the ideas of a leaderless resistance, which al-Suri referred to as the 'individual jihad'. <sup>9</sup> Consequently, a growing number of Muslim religious ideological extremists have formed fluid informal networks that are self-financed and self-trained, not housed in physical headquarters, and which operate through a scattered, decentralised social structure. This has been the case particularly after 9/11, when national security agencies have made it increasingly difficult for individuals to travel and join terrorist networks. Hence, many radicalised individuals have found a virtual space, through the internet, to mobilise, determining the means, processes and tactics to support the broader Muslim ideological extremist project.

## **Push and Pull Factors.**

Push factors refer to situations and circumstances which may push individuals towards extremist views and actions. Such circumstances could include poverty, war, marginalisation, insecurity and feelings of one's 'in-group' being under attack. Pull factors are the flipside of push factors. These are circumstances or situations which may attract individuals into joining an extremist group or adopting extremist ideologies. Some pull factors may include economic stability, safety, economic mobility, freedom, and feelings of belongingness. Both far-right and Muslim religious ideological extremists have described feeling alienated and marginalised as a push factor, and finding a sense of acceptance and belonging as a pull factor.

8 - Jeffrey Simon, Lone wolf terrorism: Understanding the growing threat. (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2016).

9 - Jessica Stern & JM Berger, ISIS: The state of terror. (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).

Sentiments blaming minority communities for the loss of unquestioned white privilege and the associated decrease of economic opportunities have been festering for some time in Western nations <sup>10</sup>. Such grievances have become the rallying cries supporting white supremacists and the recent emergence of alt-right movements in North America and Europe. Growing concerns over challenges to white privilege have caused individuals to feel that their 'in-group' is under attack, bringing about feelings of perceived alienation and marginalisation. Individuals who experience feelings of marginalisation, disempowerment and a perceived inability to achieve societal goals are more susceptible to adopting extremist ideologies. Maxime Fiset, a former neo-Nazi and far-right radical, described how feelings of isolation and alienation deeply contributed to his adopting far-right views <sup>11</sup>. Fiset, like many others, described how he was ignorant of the world around him, that he was lonely and angry, and that he needed someone to blame for his problems <sup>12</sup>. Many other former white supremacists and far-right extremists have described how feelings of alienation, marginalisation and believing that their in-group was under attack, were central conditions that pushed them towards adopting extremist ideologies <sup>13</sup>. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Muslims who have adopted extremist views, or those who have joined extremist groups.

Terrorist organisations, particularly ISIS, have capitalised on Muslim youth alienation and have branded themselves as a safe haven for marginalised young Muslims who feel that they do not belong to their nations of residence. Consequently, a number of young Muslims have left their homes to join ISIS, citing grievances that stem from feeling ostracised from their home societies. For example, in 2015, seven young Muslims from Montreal, Canada, decided to leave their homes and join the conflict in Syria. A number of these youth had expressed serious concerns over discrimination and marginalisation towards Muslims in their home province. Similar situations have been reported in France. Since 2004, France has proposed and passed a number of legislations that have targeted Muslim womens' dress, including the hijab, burka and burkini. As ISIS plays off identity struggles, it comes as little surprise that the largest number of western female recruits are from France <sup>14</sup>. Many of these women have claimed feelings of alienation from their home societies and the need to find a community that would accept them as factors in their choices. Furthermore, female ISIS recruiters often implore Muslim women from Western nations to join ISIS as a religious obligation, in order to freely practice their faith without fear of harassment and molestation.

## Ideology.

The most central ideological driving force for extremist thought, from both far-right and Muslim ideological extremists is religion. Far-right extremists often invoke Christian religious

<sup>10</sup> - Michael Kimmel, *Angry white men: American masculinity at the end of an era.* (New York: Nation Books, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> - David Gutnick, CBC Radio: Sunday edition. (2017, February 5). Retrieved from CBC Web site: <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/islamophobia-david-gutnick-meets-a-former-neo-nazi-democracy-in-peril-1.3966549/former-quebec-neo-nazi-speaks-out-about-how-he-learned-to-hate-minorities-1.3966671>

<sup>12</sup> - Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> - James Fry, *The Guardian: Comments.* (2015, January 20). Retrieved from The Guardian Web site: <https://www.theguardian.com/comment-isfree/2015/jan/20/i-was-radicalised-by-a-neo-nazi-group-it-could-just-have-easily-been-isis>

<sup>14</sup> - Rafia Zakaria, *Women and Islamic militancy.* *Dissent*, 62(1), (2015), 118-125.

identity, whereas Muslim religious extremists regularly invoke takfiri religious dogma. When examining the growth of far-right extremism, particularly among individuals who commit acts of terrorism, Christian identity plays a prominent role in justifying and explaining their actions. In the US, the vast majority of far-right Christian extremists identify as Protestants and reside in culturally homogeneous neighbourhoods with higher than average rates of evangelical Protestants<sup>15</sup>. A common form of far-right terrorist activity in the US is the targeting of abortion clinics and doctors. Far-right extremists who target abortion clinics and doctors do so because they advocate a 'pro-life' position on the issue of abortion, which is in line with traditional Christian beliefs and values. Christian identity has also been influential among white supremacist groups. This has been the case with the Ku Klux Klan, as they advocate various conspiracy theories about Jews and are invariably associated with the image of a burning cross. In the European context, a number of far-right extremists view Christianity as a cultural affiliation, associated with traditional European identity. This was exemplified by the far-right extremist Anders Breivik.

Anders Breivik was the man behind the 2011 Norway Attack, one of the most devastating lone wolf terrorist attacks in recent history<sup>16</sup>. Breivik first detonated a car bomb in Oslo and then went on to undertake a mass-shooting on Utøya Island the same day, leaving 77 people dead. Breivik engaged in this massacre to bring to light fears he had of the Islamisation and Muslim colonisation of Europe<sup>17</sup>. Shortly before the attack, Breivik published a 1,500 page manifesto entitled '2083: A European Declaration of Independence'. The cover of this manifesto was emblazoned with the iconic imagery of a red cross, commonly associated with the radical Christian crusading military order of the Knights Templar. In his writings, Breivik advocated a mono-cultural Christian Europe, referring to himself as a modern day crusader<sup>18</sup>. Evoking Christian imagery, particularly images of the crusades, has also become a common theme among protest movements that oppose the Islamisation of Europe. The English Defence League (EDL) is an Islamophobic street protest movement aimed at preserving UK identity and culture in the face of the perceived Islamisation of the UK and Europe. Since its inception in 2009, it has been one of the most active far-right groups and the most covered in the media in Europe from 2009-2015<sup>19</sup>. The EDL commonly employs imagery of the Knights Templar cross and crusaders in their advertisements, claiming to be defenders of the UK against radical Islamic ideologies. The EDL logo is composed of the red Templar cross over a white and black background. Above the cross is written 'English Defence League' and below the cross is the Latin phrase 'in hoc signo vinces' (in this sign you will conquer). The EDL motto of 'in hoc signo vinces' evokes a historical legacy of Christian religious combat and militancy. The images employed by the EDL, like many others associated with far-right movements around the world, incorporate messages of the far-right's growing obsession with and nostalgia for the middle ages, particularly the period of the crusades. Often this

15 - Steven Chermak & Jeffery Gruenewald, "Laying a foundation for the criminological examination of right-wing, left-wing, and al Qaeda-inspired extremism in the United States", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27(1), (2015), 133-159.

16 - Ibid.

17 - Victoria Klesty & Gwladys Fouche, Reuters. (2011, July 24). Retrieved from Reuters Web site: <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-58415820110724>

18 - Ibid.

19 - Kevin Braouezek, "Identifying common patterns of discourse and strategy among the new extremist movements in Europe: The Case of the English Defence League and the Bloc Identitaire", *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 37(6), (2016), 637-648.

nostalgia is couched in apocalyptic rhetoric by far-right ideologues. One such example is Steven Bannon.

Steve Bannon is the former White House Chief Strategist to the President of the US. He also occupied the position of executive chairman of Breitbart News, a far-right American news, opinion and commentary website. Like many far-right zealots, Bannon has a strong religious identity, and through Breitbart News he pedaled wild conspiracy theories about the Islamisation of America and the dire threat posed by globalists and liberals. In a 2014 conference address, convened at the Vatican, Bannon described how the Judeo-Christian West was standing at the brink of a war with Islamic fascism. He contended that Islam was “threatening to overrun a prostrate West weakened by the erosion of traditional Christian values”<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, Bannon argued that ISIS constitutes the greatest threat facing the West, and drew comparisons of the West putting a stop to Islamic expansionism, as it had done traditionally throughout European history. The views echoed by Bannon are similar to those of Evangelical lobbyists that had formed a major political support base throughout the presidency of George W. Bush. These Evangelical lobby groups supported an aggressive Middle-Eastern foreign policy in favour of the state of Israel because of their belief that Jewish control over Jerusalem and the holy land was necessary for the second coming of Jesus Christ. As such, these groups were using politics as a catalyst for fulfilling apocalyptic prophecies and asserting civilisational discourses. In promoting simplistic and un-nuanced binaries that imply a dualistic nature between Islam and the West, ideologues and protest organisations have contributed towards growing far-right and white supremacist movements in a number of Western nations. When considering Islamist extremism, one can similarly note religious identity issues and civilisational narratives as crucial elements that inform this type of extremist thought.

A number of studies have indicated that Muslims holding radicalised views have very low levels of religious literacy. One such study looked at radicalised Muslims from Germany<sup>21</sup>. In this study, German researchers analysed 5,757 WhatsApp messages found on a phone that was seized by police during a 2016 terrorist attack. The WhatsApp messages were exchanges on a chat between 12 young men who were involved in an unidentified terrorist attack. According to the study, the young men demonstrated through their WhatsApp conversations that they had very little understanding of their professed faith, and essentially constructed a ‘Lego Islam’ to suit their whims and justify their actions. The study notes that the youth distanced themselves from local mosques, had no formal training in religion and lacked basic knowledge about Islam. This study confirms findings from an ISIS leaked internal report regarding new recruits, which indicated that the vast majority of ISIS fighters are religiously illiterate<sup>22</sup>. According to ISIS defectors, the organisation preyed on religious ignorance and would take

20 - Jason Horowitz, New York Times: Europe. (2017, February 17). Retrieved from New York Times Web site: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/world/europe/vatican-steve-bannon-pope-francis.html>

21 - Antonia Blumberg, Huffington Post: World News. (2017, July 14). Retrieved from Huffington Post Web site: [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/german-study-finds-radicalized-muslims-have-little-actual-knowledge-of-islam\\_us\\_5967f362e4b03389bb163c58](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/german-study-finds-radicalized-muslims-have-little-actual-knowledge-of-islam_us_5967f362e4b03389bb163c58)

22 - Aya Batrawy, Paisley Dodds & Lori Hinnant, The Independent: News. (2016, August 16). Retrieved from The Independent Web site: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-documents-leak-recruits-islam-sharia-religion-faith-syria-iraq-a7193086.html>

recruits through an indoctrination process to promote a type of Islam that was suited for its goals of territorial expansion and extreme violence once recruits had signed up to join the organisation. Hence, a large portion of ISIS recruits, much like the lone wolf radicalised individuals that ISIS has claimed as its foot soldiers, have a very basic knowledge of Islam and in many cases have a fluid non-committal relationship with their faith. In other words, Islam serves as an identity through which these individuals are able to mobilise, justify their acts of violence and find like-minded individuals. Through religious ignorance, radicalised individuals become more susceptible to the acceptance of takfiri ideology. Hence, as was the case with far-right extremism, religion is not necessarily the cause of acts of violence and terrorism, but is used as a justifier for such acts. Muslim ideological extremists also promote civilisational discourses in which Islam is diametrically opposed to and bound to engage in an apocalyptic battle with the West.

Al-Qaida and ISIS have frequently employed apocalyptic narratives as a mobilising force. In the case of al-Qaida, their apocalyptic branding came through prophecies in the Islamic tradition relating to a region referred to as Khorasan. Khorasan is a wide geographic location encompassing parts of Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan, which became significant because al-Qaida was functioning out of Afghanistan and it is prophesised that the Mahdi, a spiritual leader who Muslims claim will unite them and lead them to victory before the coming of the final days, will emerge from this area along with an army bearing black flags. Fulfilling apocalyptic prophecies was central to ISIS's capture of Dabiq in 2014, a Syrian town near the Turkish border. Dabiq did not have any strategic military value for ISIS, but it was attractive to ISIS because of prophecies that it will be a place where a great battle will take place prior to the final days. Hence, like far-right extremists, ISIS makes efforts to precipitate apocalyptic prophecies. The use of apocalyptic narratives has been an effective recruiting tool for ISIS, as a number of ISIS recruits have reported joining the group because they believed the end of times was imminent<sup>23</sup>. ISIS also employs these apocalyptic narratives to reinforce a clash of civilisations thesis, as they believe that a great battle will ensue in Dabiq against Western nations.

Through examining these ideological patterns from far-right and Muslim extremist groups and individuals, it becomes apparent that these forms of extremist thought are producing competing, yet complementary narratives. In other words, they are distorted mirror images of one another. They both rely on religious identity as an organising and mobilising force, they both promote civilisational discourses where they are each other's enemies, and they both foresee an apocalyptic battle that is bound to rage against each other. Many of these antagonistic views from the far-right and Muslim extremists manifest through online mediums where individuals voice concerns and fears of their cultures being threatened by the 'Other'.

24 - David Kirkpatrick, The New York Times (2014, October 21). Africa. Retrieved from The New York Times Web site: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/22/world/africa/new-freedoms-in-tunisia-drive-support-for-isis.html?mcubz=0>

Through these indirect interactions, both groups perceive each other as existential threats and become the objects of each other's fears. As these interactions are not directed towards one another, counter-narratives become elusive. Furthermore, these two strands of extremist thought fuel hatred for one another by reinforcing each other's generalising simplistic binary views. The potential impact of these reinforcing viewpoints becoming normalised in the public sphere through far-right political discourse and rhetoric, biased media coverage of Muslims and Islam, and the open flow of misinformation through social media platforms on the internet can be devastating. In such a scenario, these competing and complementary narratives of extremist thought can create an echo chamber where balanced non-extremist views become relegated.

## Conclusion

Policies relating to CVE have overwhelmingly focused on addressing security concerns, such as preventing acts of violence and terrorism, but have yet to offer effective approaches for addressing the origins of what cause individuals to adopt extremist views that lead to extremist violence. Some nations have instituted programmes for preventing violent extremism by identifying individuals who may be prone to or are on a trajectory towards committing acts of violent extremism, however, these state run programs have misidentified numerous individuals<sup>24</sup>. States implementing heavy handed CVE strategies need to exercise caution and due diligence, as such approaches cement the view of both far-right and Muslim extremists that the government is against them and is unfairly targeting them<sup>25</sup>. Ultimately, CVE initiatives need to be holistic and examine the issue of violent extremism not simply as a religious or cultural concern, but rather as one that is forged by geo-political-historical realities. Religion has been used as a justifier for extremist thought and actions, however, extremism thrives with or without religion under certain social and political conditions. When individuals believe they can affect meaningful change through an existing system of power and there are opportunities for mutual understanding and dialogue, they will not feel the need to engage in acts of violence and terrorism.

24 - Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims are coming: Islamophobia, extremism, and the domestic War on Terror*. (New York: Verso, 2014).

25 - Steven Chermak & Jeffery Gruenewald, "Laying a foundation for the criminological examination of right-wing, left-wing, and al Qaeda-inspired extremism in the United States" *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27(1), (2015), 133-159.





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