



REVIEW FOR THE EXPERIENCE OF COUNTER-EXTREMISM OBSERVATORY AT DAR AL-IFTAA

Hassan Mohammed

Egyptian Researcher, MPhil in Religion, Politics and Citizenship, University of Padova, Italy

Terrorism has notoriously imposed itself on the international arena, jostling for power as a serious challenge that calls for a broad response from the international parties to counter the emerging threats to the local, regional and international environments that have toppled and ousted governments, while plotting against other governments to push them over political precipice and collapse. Admittedly, Egypt has not been immune to such challenges: it has encountered transnational terrorism decoyed and camouflaged under many code-named people and different slogans. To this end, counter-terrorism is a number-one priority for decision makers. Given its critical importance, ideological confrontation has been a top priority in the war on terrorism, and internal and external institutions have accordingly undertaken such confrontation, while harnessing all possibilities to eradicate and eliminate the plague and scourge of terrorism.

Proudly enough, Dar Al-Ifta has been at the forefront of the institutions that have sought to confront and counter a spate of violence and terrorism. To this end, Dar Al-Ifta established the first observatory in Egypt to confront *takfiri fatwas* and extremist views, as the first institutional work in the ideological efforts to confront and counter the push factors and catalysts of violence and extremism, and the springboard of cumulative work in refuting and responding to the narratives of *takfiri* ideology which is fueled and fraught with bloodshed.

The observatory is based on a huge stock of the *fatwas* of Dar Al-Ifta and its encyclopedias along with a wealth of associated legal scholars, experts, advisors, polymaths and researchers, empowered by Azhari scientific and solid approach, contributing to the launch of the observatory as strongly and effectively as ever at several levels.

Confrontation Levels

The observatory aims to address *takfiri* and extremist *fatwas* and evil propaganda of violent and terrorist groups, by focusing on three levels:

The first level is addressing extremist ideology. It has become glaringly evident that the plans and means pointedly used by extremist groups in recruiting different groups of society, especially the youth, are based on inference and extrapolation of jurisprudence and legitimacy in order to express their vision of the other and the world, such as governance, *jihad*, caliphate, loyalty, allegiance and other *Sharia* concepts which are infamously used in such a deviant and deceptive fashion in their extremist views far away from the origin of real and true meaning.

Despite efforts made to deal with extremists to rehabilitate and reintegrate them into their communities, there are still neglected aspects of reintegration programs that weaken their full efficient impact, especially with regard to their ability to change the extremist ideology and not just his or her behavior.

The second level is the victims of extremism, and the category closest to extremists, such as family, relatives and friends, in such a way that reveals much interest in the human and social dimension in the fight against extremism. This circle of interactions surrounding extremism remains a major line of defense of the effective way adopted to counter extremism.

The third level is the immunization of society from extremist ideas, in such a way that prevents the spread of extremist ideas in society and between generations. Immunization from extremist ideas *per se* requires a series of control measures that are not only concerned with addressing the root causes of extremism, or those that encourage the adoption of extremist ideology; rather, they address factors that tempt someone to adopt extremist ideology while someone else with the same social and economic conditions is reluctant to adopt such extremist ideology and follow suit.

Action Means

Designed as such, the observatory relies on practical means to achieve the objectives, with observation and follow-up coming at the forefront. Such action means are carried out by a team of observers specialized in electronic research and follow-up on the websites (the internet) and modern applications, games and blocked sites, collecting information and data to be provided for another team to scrutinize, screen, double-check, analyze and

then direct the results to specialists in the forensic, legal, social, political and economic sciences to deal with such data to achieve the ambitious objectives of countering extremism and its various propaganda, while preparing the necessary responses, reports and data to deal with these materials. The one responsible for or in charge of publishing and distribution processes will determine the appropriate means to publish these prepared responses, and the use of modern techniques such as images and video clips (video snippets) and animation, and then the means of dissemination of those responses and materials on different traditional and new media.

It can be argued that the multiplicity of aspects of extremism along with the interplay of political, social and religious data has also produced multiple approaches to address extremism; legal and *sharia*-based responses cannot be satisfactory only in light of the complexity, multiplicity and interplay of data with different aspects of day-to-day life.

Means of Communication and Challenges

Most observers, researchers and analysts of violent and terrorist groups agree that social media have a great impact on spreading the ideas of such groups and tempting individuals to get closer to them, while enhancing their abilities to reach as many individuals as possible through text messages, audio-visual snippets to various groups, segments and nationalities. Given such malicious methods, the Dar Al-Ifta Observatory realized that these webpages are the real arena for confrontation and decisiveness, and the party that has the ability to make impact will notch up a stunning victory and prevail.

Given the fact that traditional media channels and tools have restrictions and limitations imposed on the materials published, social media channels and tools have also various means that have imposed limitations and restrictions on the messages published and communicated from and to followers. The form and size of images, video clips and publications are all tools to influence these means and pages, and they have standards and controls that should be taken into account, if the objective is to effectively influence and reach individuals and target groups. Prompted by such a reality, the observatory felt encouraged to create a special unit of social media, which aims to put the messages and outputs of the observatory in special templates appropriate to the nature of publication on such pages. In the same vein, a specialized animation unit was also established; the first of its kind in the Egyptian religious establishment, which contributed significantly to the transformation of the contents of publications into animated (videos) actors or animations to reach the audience of the media easily and smoothly

presented in spellbinding, riveting and attractive ways. Optimistically, this has contributed to the number of followers of Dar Al-Ifta account on Facebook to more than eight million followers, as well as the rest of the accounts on the same website, in addition to accounts on (Twitter) and (Instagram) and (YouTube) and other social networks.

Outputs and Future Prospects

Following almost five years into the launch of the observatory, we can speak of more than three hundred different publications, including studies, reports, statements, short films and animated films, all published to counter and eliminate such extremist ideas, and to identify extremist and deviant approaches, and contest and provide counter-arguments to all suspicions raised, in addition to immunizing the community from such negative ideas and propaganda.

The observatory publications have included research studies on the observation of all the Quranic verses used by extremists in their misleading and deceptive propaganda, and the manifestation of deliberate deception, illusion and deviation in the perverted interpretation of their ill intentions. In addition, the observatory publications included all the *hadiths* used by these groups in spreading violence, murder, genocide and bloodshed, clarifying the falsification and alteration of their meanings, contexts and purposes, as well as dealing with historical events and religious suspicions raised by these groups about the biography of the Messenger (peace be upon him) and his noble companions based on a solid scientific approach grounded in cogency, reasoning and compelling evidence.

These research studies also addressed the sociopolitical aspects of extremism and terrorism. There have been several studies on the structure of *takfiri* and extremist organizations and their modern techniques, such as the virtual currency (Bitcoin) used by Daesh to obtain funding, purchasing and funneling weapons and equipment and transferring funds across regions. The use of terrorist organizations of what is known as the "dark web"; an internet different from the one people are familiar with, and has different browsers and working rules other than those used in the normal internet. It also includes all the modern applications used on mobile phones by Daesh for communication, telecommunication, recruitment, and sending encrypted messages.

In the same vein, the observatory issued a number of research studies that address the psychosocial aspects of recruitment and joining extremist

and terrorist organizations, and the impact of various factors such as pictures, anthems and traditional catchphrases used in mobilization and persuasion. The observatory publications also included a monthly English magazine called "Insight" for non-Arabic speakers. The magazine addresses the suspicions, falsehood and illusion of violent and terrorist groups.

Towards a Future Free of Extremism

The observatory seeks to transfer its experiences, expertise, ideas and publications to all segments of society concerned with immunization from and confrontation with extremism. In this regard, the observatory has developed a counter-extremism reference guide that provides an action plan to address extremism. The counter-extremism reference guide first provides detailed explanation and identification of extremism along with associated characteristics and statements. It also elaborates on the elimination of the ideas, motivations and environments that support and drum up for extremism. The observatory is currently transforming this reference guide into training programs that provide all segments of society with the necessary skills and information to best deal with this phenomenon, so that the confrontation becomes methodologically holistic and decisive to such a serious challenge facing the Arab and Islamic countries, posing a notorious threat to their security and future.