



Hilmi Demir

*Area Studies Program
Consultant*

RADICAL SALAFI MOVEMENTS AND TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Turkey is a country invested with the means and capacity to understand current events, to interpret them, to create solutions and develop a strategy. Yet there seems to be an incongruent lack of depth in academic circles regarding a theoretical framework and field work on the subject of radicalization. Research in Turkey often fails to go any further than reiterating concepts produced in the West such as “jihadist” or “Salafi”.

However, we will be unable to create our own solutions without developing objective, generally accepted and valid theories about how we describe and explain events and without defining our very own concepts, which will in turn indicate the way we interpret them.

Turkey erroneously deals with religious organizations and events related with religion without a defined framework and a geopolitical projection. In the absence of such projection that should determine your strategy as to how to interpret the course of events in the region, as well as your strategic management and guidance under those particular circumstances, it would be possible neither to become a great power, nor exert any influence in the region. In other words, you cannot manage events and violence sparked by religion without a geopolitical projection based on religion. For those asking “What does Religious Geopolitics mean?” I would like to share my own definition on the subject. **Religious Geopolitics** is the following: “The definition and construction of a context resulting from the analysis of the religious structures present in a particular region of a state or at a global scale, their ideology, their network and the different groups, with an aim to solve conflicts, prevent threats or, by doing so, to develop cultural, political and economic cooperation”.

Religious conflicts have become an integral part of strategies seeking to dominate certain regions, particularly during the present century. The ties between religious structures, organizations and communities with violence, the media and the internet networks are creating new spaces for domination. Thus, religious geopolitics guides us by giving precedence to analyses that help to understand religious structures in the context of new relationships and new generated spaces.

As no conceptual studies have been carried out on this subject until now, we are still unable to make a different description of the spiral of violence that started with al-Qaeda and is ongoing with DAESH/ISIS. The activities of these organizations are described by the West as “Jihadism” or “Salafism”, those terms also being frequently used in Turkey. In a similar vein, the Western public labels the Syrian conflict as “Sectarian Wars”, which we find convenient to use as well. But if, after acknowledging that, you say “the source of the events currently taking place is not religion and Islam could never be the source of violence”, your claim would not be accepted under any circumstances in the Western public opinion and academic circles. Therefore, we must first present a theoretical framework as to the ways to describe these organizations and their activities. Now, I would like to redefine the conceptual framework on this matter based on the religious geopolitics studies we have been conducting for many years.

I. Why Are the ‘Jihadist’ and ‘Salafi’ Definitions Wrong?

Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor of the former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, has warned U.S. President Barack Obama on using the term “jihadist”. Indeed, when you describe someone as “jihadist”, you would in fact say something favorable in the eyes of Muslims. Brzezinski is by and large right, although the “jihad” concept has a wide use in Islam that goes from an individual purification to war. Reducing jihad to war would result in hollowing the meaning of the concept.

For its part, Salafism represents a strict, canonical and puritanical interpretation of Islam. This concept is in fact used to identify orthodox and reactionary movements of religious thought that represent a return to the Quran and the *Sunnah* (transmitted traditions and practices that relate to Prophet Mohammad) and aim to purify Islam from *bid'ah* (services and practices that were invented and added to religion afterwards). In this respect, the concept is in fact used for the political ideological movements of religion that emerged from the 19th century onwards. It is possible to encounter very different forms of Salafism in a very large territory that extends from Saudi Arabia to Egypt, Morocco or even Europe. Many armed groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates describe their ideology and faith as Salafi. However, there are many forms of Salafism, such as *Saudi Salafism*, *Transmissionist Salafism*, *Scientific Salafism*, *Progressive (Takaddumi) Salafism* and *Modernist Salafism*.

According to my theory, these forms of Salafism can be grouped in four categories:

1. Theological Salafism: It includes movements such as *Transmissionist Salafism* that consider religion as a way of life and preach a pietist life experience.

2. Cultural Salafism: It describes movements that see religion as an instrument for a cognitive transformation and an ideological and intellectual struggle. *Progressive (Takadummi) Salafism* and *Modernist Salafism* can be included in this category.

3. Political Salafism: It describes movements that use religion as a form of social and political organization and advocate for transforming society through political means. The *al-Nour Party* in Egypt and Salafism stemming from the *Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhvan)* can be included in this category.

4. Radical Salafism: We can include all movements that turn religion into an instrument of oppression, refuse political participation and impose change through activities based on coercion.

A radicalization theory that explains the process of the radicalization of society should take in consideration these different forms of Salafism. These are, of course, permeable structures as one does not exclude the other. Nevertheless, from what is mentioned above, the definition that we should use when explaining organizations such as al-Qaeda that describe themselves as Salafi should be Radical Salafism.

II. Why Is the Definition 'Radical Salafi' More Useful?

A general definition is needed to show that what happens in our neighborhood is not directly caused by religion but is, in fact, a result of the revolutionary fluctuations that appeared in the 1980s and the impact of social and political events as well as the modern culture of violence in the emergence, consolidation and spread of a number of organizations, including al-Qaeda and ISIS. Therefore, I believe that the aforementioned definition will meet that need and thereby determine the general framework of the problem. Defining the problem will, at the same time, make the task of devising a solution easier.

A. The Concept of Salafism presents a general framework that has influenced most of the Islamist movements that have appeared after the 19th century. This concept also defines the reactionary (*ihya*) Islamist ideology that has since the 19th century refused the sectarian system in the Islamic tradition and aims a return to the Quran and *Sunnah*. Although many theologians refer to this concept as being synonymous to *Ahl al-Hadith* or "*Salaf*", this perspective does not make much sense. The term represents indeed a religious interpretation based on *nass* (evidence) and strictness in the practice of religion. So even though there are some similarities in terms of mindset; the identity, organization, theory and institutional structure acquired by the current form of Salafism is unprecedented in history. Salafism today has a much more institutional structure and ideology. This religious thinking that has spread with the Afghan jihad provides the basis for the moral and ideological doctrine of many armed organizations that have particularly emerged in the Sunni-majority regions.

Furthermore, organizations describing themselves as jihadists express their attachment to this ideological and moral interpretation. The Salafist interpretation is by its essence universal and cosmopolitan. Indeed, it sees philosophy and culture as an insult and aims to instill a cosmopolitan representation of the *ummah* (community) by standing against all national and cultural interpretations in the name of the reinstatement of religion. Having said that, one cannot

argue all Salafi interpretations consider violence as a dynamic force of history and change. Therefore Salafism is alone not sufficient as a concept to define the structures that evolve into violent organizations resorting to terrorism. Using the attribute of “radicalism” to define Salafism to show how it has evolved into violence will be more befitting.

B. As regards the descriptive forces of the concepts of **radicalization and radicalism**, the terms are used to represent the behavior of groups that anticipate change in the social and political order by not only resorting to political instruments, but also violence, which is considered legitimate if used for change. The most basic element distinguishing a radical activity from any activity involving democratic rights and demands is the use of violence as a method. The preference for using violence as a method should not be confused with the right to use legitimate power. Indeed, there is a difference between the use of violence and power: Violence includes the use of coercion by a person who wants to impose what he wants to another person in an illegal way. In turn, the use of power includes the use of coercion as a legitimate right that takes its source from the law, provided that it is not unlawful. Hence, the most basic factor separating a social movement from another is the way it tries to carry out an action, whether by remaining within the limits defined by the law, or by looking to expand it to the extent of threatening public order through the legitimization of the use of violence.

Therefore violence used by radical movements is not only directed to the individual, human life and property, but can also threaten cultural and moral values that unite a society. There is a considerably close relationship between violence and radicalization. Another important notion at this point is the fact that the causes prompting social movements to use violence are very diverse and different. Causes that can trigger radicalism include social structure, the blocking of political participation, economic factors, cultural and ideological reasons, ethnic nationalism, the support of groups exerting an external threat, poverty and privations.

Radicalism, as well as fundamentalism, which is often used as an equivalent to this concept, is used in a very wide spectrum to describe groups that are utterly different one from another, such as extremist ethnic and separatist organizations, certain religious social movements, movements of political Islam (particularly by the West) and extremist ideological social structures. Although religious causes are usually shown as the main motivation behind radicalism, there are many incentives other than religion that lead social movements to turn violent. Today in particular, radical terrorism resorts to political violence as an instrument and operates in a very large territory to attain its goals. Organizations often use universal ideals or their struggle for independence as a justification for their terrorist activities and search for ethnic and religious legitimacy.

C. Transition from Revolution to Radicalization and from Radicalization to Terrorism:

When looking back on past social movements and activities, we find the use of violence as a method and means in the ideology of revolution. Against the belief that all the problems faced by humanity can be solved by democratic means or by the establishment of a democratic state with a reformist method, communist ideology has marked the 20th century with the idea that revolutionary violence is the only and single road for change. By revolution, they did not mean the preservation of status quo after the fall of a dictator, quite to the contrary, it signified complete change: revolution would change, destroy, avenge and build from scratch. This is why violence is an inseparable part of historic laws according to the revolutionary perspective. Violence is a condition and is inevitable; the rightful violence of the oppressed ensures them to

reclaim their dignity and defeat all their enemies, even those who are said to be invincible. Sometimes an eschatological perspectives prevails. Accordingly, the use of violence and destruction will lead to the rebirth of human life. Violence becomes creative through the sacrifice of both the oppressor and the oppressed.

This theoretical legitimization of violence entails its legitimization in practice. Thereby fighting in the streets, illegal actions in the name of the workers' class – like in the Robin Hood tale – that even may use violence, sabotage, the kidnapping of business bosses and reprisals against permanent staff, attacks against public security forces, police posts or prisons are ordinary and necessary. Since the communist strategy is seen as the refusal of all perspectives of social transformation, especially those carried out through elections, revolutionaries are forced to respond to the reactionary violence with revolutionary violence. According to them, this is neither a subjective nor an arbitrary choice, but the result of the strict objectivity entirely stemming from the reality of a society divided into classes, and the class struggle. In this context, violence has a rightful and revolutionary function in the historic evolution of humanity. To cite a famous quotation from Karl Marx, violence or coercion “is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one” as revolutionary violence is a necessary instrument “with which social movement forces its way through and shatters the dead, fossilized political forms.” Accordingly, a revolution through violence is an essential condition for the birth of a new society.

A language that saw violence and revolutionary violence as a fundamental ontological characteristic of this change and consecrated it has been the main motivation behind social actions for decades, even centuries. This language has found a place across the world, in Europe, Latin America and even in the Palestinian resistance. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin wall have destroyed all hopes for changing the course of history by the means of violence to such a point that, following the reunification of Germany, capitalism declared its absolute victory and all other narratives went to the dustbin of history. This has led all protest movements in the 1990s against the West to experience a deep nihilism. For many years, no global ideology of protest that could replace left-wing ideologies was able to emerge in the West. Radical Salafism, which reached a global scale with the September 11 attacks, backed with the revolutions in social media and the culture industry, has filled the void of a new global protest ideology.

As a result of these conceptual developments and events, Radical Salafism replaced violence and revolution with “jihad” and the capitalist state with *Taghut* (idolatry) to become a new ideology of terror. In fact, what has happened today is nothing more than the radicalization of the revolutionary spirit as a global opposition at a time when all the ideologies in the West have collapsed in the midst of an ongoing crisis. The revolutionary spirit and nihilist philosophy of our times have found a new body in Radical Salafism. This is why Radical Salafism is evolving from social movements into finding its place in terrorist organizations.

What enthalls jihadists today are not intellectual debates, metaphysical representations of theology or the *al-Insan al-Kamil* (perfect human being) philosophy found in Sufism, but action and violence. Instead of an education based on a long process of meditation and contemplation, or the purification from carnal instincts, or a life of martyrdom, it is rather the militarist way of life and violent actions that appeal to the young people. The numbers of those who converted to Islam among foreign fighters is significant. These people do not opt for Islam after going through a long process of meditation. They do not need a long period of time to create social ties after

converting to Islam either. They run to fight against the society they live in, with anger, resentment and a desire of vengeance. As a result, people without any special attribute until today can suddenly find themselves in Syria tomorrow.

Radicalization is a complex process that includes terrorist activities. Today, the radicalization that can be observed in Radical Salafism should not only be interpreted as a process of protest and rebellious spirit, but one that also involves self-destructive action. It should be remembered that this process has different stages, each one with different causes and each cause producing its local context according to the region where it occurs. Without doing so, it does not seem plausible to start understanding this process.

Conclusion

To conclude, the wave of violence we are currently facing results from a revolutionary culture that humanity has been unable to solve for a very long time and therefore delayed tackling, leading to their accumulation; as crises stemming from the deep injustices caused by modern politics and forms of administration have found a new way of resistance and opposition in the Salafist ideology. The political culture, geography and socio-economic structure where the Salafist ideology takes its roots is as important as the moral and ideological doctrine in the background. In order to deal with this problem, it is necessary to take into consideration the multi-variable parameters and the context they belong to, while implementing a more democratic, participative, reformist and open political culture. But the only possible way to make this happen is an accurate diagnosis of the problem. Therefore, I propose to consider and discuss this wave of violence and the terrorist organizations that have emerged, from the perspective of **Radical Salafi Movements and Terrorist Organizations**.