

## **Title: Othering Islam Through Extremism**

### **Working Paper (do not cite/no citar)**

#### **1. Introduction:**

Criticism is a practice that allows us to reflect on notions and ideas to which we are so accustomed that we take as natural. However, these ideas are social, thus historical. This means that what we currently experience has been, will be or can be experienced differently. This way, critiquing implies highlighting the political and hence polemical character of things that appear as non-political. In the security field, this involves considering threats and referent objects not as objective things that are out there waiting to be identified, but as products of discursive practices.

This way, from a critical perspective, security is conceived of as a practice that constitutes identity and otherness. Indeed, discourses on security “tell us who we must be” (Walker, 1997, p. 72). To do so, it also constitutes an Other against which the I constitutes itself. In terms of security, identity appears as the referent object of security (and, in this sense, it answers the question of security for whom) and otherness plays the role of the threat (and, thus, answers the question of security from what).

In this Illustrative Chapter, we will show how we can critically reflect on extremism as a discourse that constitutes identities and otherness. On the one hand, what is the otherness that the discourse on extremism produces? Or, what is the threat that it identifies? On the other hand, what is the identity it produces? In other words, whose security is it concerned with? Besides, with which other discourses is this discourse entangled?

## 2. 2.1. **Description:**

Critically reflecting on extremism is of utmost importance because it makes part of our everyday vocabulary. If you google it right now, you will find lots of news' headlines asserting the existence of extremists and extremist ideologies surrounding us. There are two main features which I would like to highlight in this brief description of the problematic. First, that, as we will see, despite its daily use, there is not a clear definition of the term. This is, there is not consent on its meaning, on what is to be an extremist (we will deal with this issue in the next section). Second, that as is currently used by international organizations and (mainly) Western governments, is relatively new. According to Chin Kuei Tsui, it emerged in the 2000s linked to the Global War on Terror and the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings (Chin) and it gradually replaced terrorism as the main global threat. If words are only considered as instruments to reflex what is happening, this changing does not appear as significant. However, if words are considered as of world-making this change calls our attention. What are the effects of such a change? Specifically, what are the effects of such a change in the construction of identities and otherness? Let's take it easy and make a rapid genealogy of the term extremism and how it reinforced terrorism considered as the main global threat confronting Western governments.

After the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration identified terrorism as the main global threat and started the "Global War on Terror". This particular war was enacted through a division of the world into two sides: Us and Them. While the "us" was deemed as representing humanity, the "them" referred to its enemies (the terrorists) who, hence, had to be wiped out. A highlighted feature of this terrorist threat was that it was ubiquitous. This means that terrorism had no borders and, thus, could be everywhere. This is why in 2001 the US government created the USA Patriot Act and in 2002 the

Department of Homeland Security, unifying under a single command all the security agencies operating within the US.

The terrorist threat thus conceived implied a strategy to counter it that confronted its symptoms, this is, confronted terrorist acts that were being carried out or that had already been carried out. This is to say that this approach was repressive and reactive, involving tactics such as killing, arresting, sanctioning, and confining. In other words, since it was conceived as a police and military problem, the proposed solution was also of that type. Over time, this approach did not work and started to be criticised, mainly because it “treated terrorism as an event rather than as a process, and as such ignored conditions conducive to radicalization and extremism that lead to terrorism” (El-Said, p. 4).

In this context, as asserted, extremism gradually replaced terrorism as the main threat to the West. This does not mean that extremism did not appear in discourses on terrorism. On the contrary, it did appear as one of its causes. However, terrorism continued to be the main character. What now had changed was that extremism was identified as the main cause of it and, therefore, took the leading role, becoming the main target to combat it. In Alice Martini’s words: “Extremism evolved from being a category representative of the risk of the terrorist threat into being considered the threat itself” (Martini, *Encountering*, 166).

Scholars agree that the attacks in the London transportation system in July 2005 was core to this shift. Indeed, the use of the term extremism to designate the enemies of the liberal West consolidated during this period when the threat was identified not only overseas but also within the West. As with the case of terrorism, the use of this notion to construct this new threat (the extremist) entailed a specific strategy to counter it. This way, to respond to this problem, the British government put at work a policy project

aimed at preventing violent extremism which was initiated by the Obama administration in 2011. In turn, this transformation in the identification of the threat also affected international organisations such as the United Nations: “between 2014 and 2016 (...) extremism managed to establish itself at the core of the Council’s discourse” (Martini, *Encountering*, 164). Indeed, in 2015 the United Nations Secretary-General announced the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.

The preventive strategy to confront violent extremism was aimed at “combat the circulation of extremist ideology” (Kudnani, p. 12)<sup>1</sup>. Unlike the repressive and reactive approach, extremism implies a productive and preventive one (see Martini 2021). This means that, unlike the previous counter-terrorist approach, the new one is mainly directed at avoiding radicalization. To do that it is necessary, in the first place, to detect who runs the risk of radicalization. This requires the participation of the whole community where the life of the would-be extremists develops. Indeed, the community is supposed to be attentive to diverse signs through the daily surveillance of its members. In the cases in which radicalization cannot be avoided, radicalized subjects are re-educated to avoid them becoming terrorists. This way, strategies to prevent violent extremism do not respond to acts but to ways of thinking of the world and its workings and, therefore, do not consider the problem as a police and military one but as social.

After making a rapid review of the passage from terrorism to extremism as the main global threat and its effects on security policies, in the next section, I will ask what otherness and what identity does the discourse on extremism produce. To answer this

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<sup>1</sup> Ver “Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Ex tremism in the United States”, August 2011, White House.

question, I will need to deepen a little bit more in the construction of this threat and embed our reflection within another discourse: orientalism.

## **2.2.Critical Reflections:**

As asserted in the introduction, from a critical point of view, extremism does not appear as an objective threat (this is, as a threat that it is not related to the subject that observes and labels it), but as a discursive one. This way, since it is not conceived of as a merely descriptive term, it appears as political and, thus, normative, constituting at the same time otherness (i.e., the threat) and identities (i.e., the subject to be secured).

Hence, the first question we have to do to critically reflect on extremism is what does it mean. What is extremism? The short answer is: we do not know. There are several references to the term but the only consensus is that it is a “contested term” (Halverson et al., 2011, p. 6), a “diverse phenomenon, without a clear definition” (UNGA, 2015, p. 1). The polemical character of the term allows it to be used for several purposes, mainly to get rid of political enemies. Indeed, while the other is accused of being an extremist, the speaker defines himself as occupying a moderate center (Kudnani, p. 75). Thus, it is clear how the use of the term extremism does not only lack a definition but is also used to the constitution of a political separation between a moderate “us” and an extremist “them”.

Hence, the second question that opens up: who is the extremist other? When introducing the Global War on Terror, I asserted that it divided the world into two sides: us and them. However, the “them” was not constituted by whatever terrorism but by a very specific one: “Islamic terrorism”. This became evident not only in the White House’s

speeches but also in the Global War on Terror's battlefields: territories with a Muslim majority, among them, especially the Middle East<sup>2</sup>. Something similar happens regarding the extremist threat. Although there is another kind of extremisms, most counter-extremist strategies are aimed at combating Islamic extremism. This is evident in the identification of "Islamist ideology" as the ideology to be confronted and of Muslims as a suspect community (Breen-Smyth, Encountering) to whose vigilance most of the state's security funding is directed (Kudnani). It is also evident in the first paragraph of the United Nations' Secretary-General Letter to the UN General Assembly introducing the UN's Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism where Ban Ki-Moon affirms to be "appalled by the attacks and atrocities committed by terrorist groups such as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab"<sup>3</sup>, all of them, Islamic groups. Thus, both the terrorist and the extremist threats were constructed as non-Western, non-white, and non-secular.

The link between terrorism/extremism and Islam can be contextualized within the colonial relationship between the West and the Orient that Edward Said labelled as "orientalism" (Said, Orientalism). According to the Palestinian author, orientalism entails the constitution of Western identity through its differentiation from the Orient which, therefore, is constituted as the other. In this relation, the Orient is presented as something radically different from the West, its history being conceived as entirely separated from Western and global processes (mainly colonization). This way, Muslim culture is reified. This means that orientalist discourse does not take into account differences between diverse forms of living and experiencing Islam and that it is

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<sup>2</sup> As asserted by President George W. Bush: "We're fighting the enemy on many fronts -- from the streets of the Western capitals to the mountains of Afghanistan, to the tribal regions of Pakistan, to the islands of Southeast Asia and the Horn of Africa". Available at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/08/20050824.html>; retrieved 4th March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/675](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/675)

conceived as something that does not change according to the diverse political, social, economic, historical contexts within which it is embedded.

Within the Orient, Said specifically studies the West's relationship with the Middle East asserting that Arabs and Muslims appear as a "disturbing element of the existence of (...) the West" (Said, p. 337), the latter being afraid of the former's invasion of the world (Said, p. 338), enabled by their assumed natural violence. In this discourse, Islam is presented as a monolithic idea rejecting the West in its totality and in need of modernization (meaning westernization). In this sense, Said also asserts that orientalism entails a "missionary attitude towards the orientals who are considered as of prepared to be reformed and re-educated" (Said, p. 343).

So, it is possible to situate the discourse on the Islamic extremist threat within this larger discourse. Indeed, although the analysed discourse establishes a difference between moderate and extremist Muslims, as asserted, it identifies "Islamist ideology" as the more dangerous ideology (hence, the huge sums of money directed at its confrontation). Logically, despite the aforementioned differentiation, it is only Muslims that can become Islamists. If it is the preventive approach that prevails, all the Muslim community is identified as being at risk of becoming Islamist and, hence, extremist and, therefore, terrorist. Besides, because of the difficulty in defining extremism, this classification of Muslims into moderate and extremist is highly unstable, "putting moderate Muslims in the precarious position of continually being scrutinized for evidence that they really have distanced themselves from Islamist ideology" (Kudnani, p. 118). If this is possible, it is because it is assumed that they can be re-educated and, in this way, be accepted as being part of "us".

And this leads us to our third and last question: Who is the "us"? What is the identity produced by the discourse on extremism? Whose security this discourse is concerned

with? In answering our first question, we said that there is not a single definition of extremism but that the extremist other is defined against a moderate self. So, the “us” is, first all, defined as “occupying a moderate center” (Kudnani). However, if the extremist threat does not refer to any extremist but to a non-Western, non-white, non-secular one, the moderate “us” appear as Western, white, and secular. This way discourse on extremism constitutes the dominant (white) population as the referent object, that is, as the subject who needs security. This explains that white Western secular extremism is not considered as dangerous as the Islamic one. Indeed, there is a clear reluctance in naming far-right/white supremacists killings as terrorist acts (cita) and white extremism is in general erased from counter-extremist policies (Dixit and Breen-Smith and Martini in Encountering).

Orientalism: This relation is based on and constitutes the racial assumption of the West’s superiority in the political, economic and moral realms. Thus, Western political organization such as liberal democracy, Western liberal capitalism, and Western secularism appear not only as of the best possible ways of living but also as with the attribute of becoming universal.

### **3. Concluding Thoughts**

Who needs security? A quién se le traslada la inseguridad > Security tiene como otro lado de la moneda la creación de inseguridad para el otro.

How I have approached the case in my work (just some examples):

Terrorism + Religious Racism (discussion with the term islamophobia) in G. W. Bush discourses.



Terrorism + Religious Racism: media analysis

Terrorism as an absolute enemy (Schmitt)

Extremism/Moderation and the construction of the liberal subject

Latin American IR and peripheral orientalism (the Middle East through sectarian readings)

When teaching about the Middle East, I like to start my classes by asking the students what do they know about the region. The exercise done in South American universities consists of asking the students to say the first words that appear to their mind when thinking about the Middle East. The answers are usually the same: conflict, war, violence, fundamentalism, religion, Islam, lack of rights, oil. Moreover, in general, the study of the Middle East by the discipline of IR can be located within the field of international security studies (lecturas que predominan?). In other words, IR's knowledge of the Middle East is mainly based on the idea that the main concern regarding the region is the combination of conflict and Islam. Podría decirse algo acá de las lecturas culturalistas (ver texto sobre lecturas sectarias).