

## Challenges of Preventive Intellectual Awareness in the Context of Evolving Terrorist Ideologies: A Forward-Looking Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** This article addresses the intellectual awareness methods used to combat extremist terrorist ideology in Islamic societies from its emergence during the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphate to the present day. It also examines the evolution of religious terrorist ideology across different historical periods, highlighting the reasons and factors that contributed to its spread in each era. The article discusses the awareness and counterterrorism strategies employed and evaluates their effectiveness in combating extremist thought. Additionally, it explores the religious, doctrinal, Cultural. social, economic, political, media, and technological challenges that may hinder the effectiveness of preventive awareness programs in contemporary Islamic societies.

### I. INTRODUCTION

In our contemporary world, the importance of intellectual preventive awareness as a tool to combat extremism and terrorism is increasingly recognized. It plays a crucial role in enhancing awareness and understanding among individuals and communities about extremist ideologies and ideas, and in effectively countering them. By fostering intellectual preventive awareness regarding the dangers of extremist thought and equipping individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills for critical thinking and objective analysis, their immunity against the negative influences of extremist ideologies, which may lead to violent and unlawful behaviors, is strengthened.

However, the continuous evolution of terrorist strategies necessitates that intellectual preventive awareness be aligned with a precise understanding of these developments in terrorist thought, which undergo constant changes and updates in the ideologies and tactics they employ. In every era, terrorists invent new methods and innovative techniques for recruitment and influencing individuals, taking advantage of the means available in the environment they emerge in, and which align with the realities of society at that time. They utilize these to spread their ideas and achieve their goals. When the development of terrorist thought and methods is understood through the analysis of new ideologies and recruitment strategies, it becomes easier to confront it effectively by developing counter-strategies that align with these developments.

Nevertheless, the implementation of a strategy to combat extremist thought or raise awareness about its dangers encounters numerous challenges in practice, particularly in some communities where such challenges pose significant obstacles for policymakers and designers and implementers of awareness programs. This makes it difficult for intellectual preventive awareness programs to achieve their objectives unless they can overcome these challenges. This study reviews several challenges that may represent the most prominent obstacles facing legislators and implementers of awareness programs to combat extremism in the Islamic world, such as religious and doctrinal challenges, the normalization of the concept of jihadist culture, cultural challenges, social, demographic, and psychological challenges, economic challenges, technological challenges, media challenges, challenges in the field of creating awareness programs, security and political challenges, and other challenges that no society in the Islamic world is free from, whether one or some or all of them. Therefore, this study will discuss these challenges to understand their dimensions and the extent of their impact in limiting the effectiveness of intellectual awareness programs in combating terrorism, as well as identify the factors and reasons that contributed to the emergence of these challenges in light of the changes and transformations witnessed in extremist thought and the preventive awareness methods used at each stage, and their level of effectiveness or weakness in combating extremism.

### **The Emergence of Religious Extremism in Islamic Societies**

A close examination of the history of extremist religious movements reveals that their first spark ignited with the rebellion against the third caliph, Amir al-Mu'minin Uthman ibn Affan (may Allah be pleased with him), which culminated in his assassination. This revolution, in which a number of Muslims participated, did not end with his death; rather, it persisted for ages, continuing to the present day, manifesting in various forms and patterns as a result of political conflicts that cloak themselves in religious garb. All revolutionary terrorist movements in Islamic history are essentially political movements that use religion as a means to cover their objectives and as bait to ensnare those who fall into their trap. Therefore, the adversary for these movements is often the existing state, regardless of its political orientation or religious beliefs. In their view, the state is an infidel state ruled by an unjust tyrant or an apostate who governs by personal whims rather than by what God has revealed.

Consequently, every era has had its revolutionaries, and every state has had its methods of deterrence, combat, and awareness. When the phase of sedition and rebellion against Caliph Uthman began, his approach to dealing with the rebels involved enlisting some of the Companions to deter them, advise them, and convince them. However, this approach did not succeed, nor did it deter the rebels or dissuade them from proceeding with their revolution or contributing to their retraction from their beliefs, ultimately leading to his assassination (may Allah be pleased with him).

After his assassination, as revolutionary thought evolved into a takfiri (excommunication) ideology with the emergence of the Khawarij, the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib (may Allah honor his face), adopted a different approach to awareness and combat. Initially, he resorted to dialogue and debate, sending Abdullah ibn Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) to debate with the people of Harura and invite them with compelling arguments that refuted all their claims, addressed all the doubts they raised, and called them back to the fold of the Ummah and to renounce the false suspicions they held, which they used to justify their beliefs. They fabricated numerous interpretations and justifications, citing the Qur'an to legitimize their acts of killing, terrorism, and the spilling of Muslim blood, and violating their wealth and honor. Thus, they were the first to innovate the misinterpretation and misapplication of religious texts, interpreting them in a rigid and fragmented manner to justify their violent actions. Ibn Abbas's initial efforts succeeded in convincing some of the rebels to return to the Ummah, but there were those who remained steadfast in their beliefs, fanatically holding onto their opinions, inciting against the Caliph of the Muslims and some of his supporting Companions, accusing them of disbelief and apostasy for accepting the judgment of men rather than the Book of God.

At that point, it became clear to Imam Ali and subsequent caliphs and rulers of the Umayyad state that the method of dialogue, debate, sermons, and exhortations was no longer effective and that the only way to deter the renegades was through the sword. Thus, the war on terrorism began at that moment, and the caliphs and rulers of the Umayyad state adopted military confrontation as a means to uproot extremist thought after realizing that addressing thought with thought was not effective, and that "only the sword can break the sword, and only determined resolve can prevail."

This policy has remained constant throughout the ages and eras, from the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphate to the formation of the Islamic Military Alliance. Therefore, it can be said that during the initial period, methods of awareness, dialogue, and advice, along with the accompanying sermons and exhortations, persuasion, and deterrence, were ineffective in dissuading and deterring extremists from excommunicating Muslims, terrorizing them, and violating their wealth and honor. These programs did not lead to the eradication of extremist thought, necessitating the confrontation of men with men and weapons with weapons. This was the approach followed throughout the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphate during the time of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, and thereafter in the Umayyad and Abbasid states, which continued to combat the Khawarij ideology and fight them wherever they were found within the Islamic state until they were defeated and their leaders killed. They dispersed into various factions across the lands; some founded states, others sought refuge in other regions, remaining hidden from view while preserving their ideology in their minds, passing it down to their descendants, only to reemerge time and again whenever the opportunity arose and the circumstances were favorable. They are like the devil's seeds in the desert, lying dormant, waiting for each drop of rain. They remain concealed during droughts, showing no sign of life, but as soon as the rain falls, they quickly sprout from the depths of the sand, growing rapidly and violently, revealing their buried strength. Like desert seeds that spring to life with the first signs of rain, extremist ideologies thrive in times of crises, stagnation, state weakness, and the fragmentation of the Ummah, finding in these conditions an opportunity to take root and flourish.

As a final point, the failure of soft approaches in combating extremist thought during the initial phase (the phase of emergence and growth) through awareness and educational programs such as dialogue, debate, sermons, and exhortations during the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphate and the Umayyad period can be attributed to the numerous challenges these methods faced, limiting their effectiveness and preventing them from achieving their goals. The failure of these soft approaches in combating extremism is not confined to that

era alone but has become a common occurrence in all subsequent ages and societies. A close examination of preventive and remedial methods in dealing with extremist thought, both in the past and present, reveals that they encounter numerous challenges in every era, which vary from one period to another, although they generally share the same overall context. What differs from one era to another is due to the new developments in each period, such as the emergence of new forms of extremism and terrorism and the changes and evolution in extremist thought, resulting in new challenges in each phase that share a general context with previous ones but differ in causes and factors. This necessitates the innovation of new methods of prevention and awareness.

The failure of soft approaches to achieve the desired results can also be attributed to the fact that awareness and soft prevention methods in combating extremist thought, from the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphate and the Umayyad state to the present time, have always been directed at the extremists themselves, with the aim of convincing them to abandon their ideology, rather than being directed at the rest of the Ummah. The root causes and factors contributing to the increase in the number of those joining these groups and the rush of young people to join their ranks were not addressed. Instead, only the symptoms were treated, which represents ongoing challenges to the success or failure of any awareness programs from that era to the present time

## II. The Normalization of Contemporary Extremism

Despite the resurgence of extremist and takfiri ideologies in the late 18th century CE (the late 12th century AH) across numerous Islamic countries, leading to the propagation of the doctrine of loyalty and disavowal—used by extremists as a means to exclude, excommunicate, and justify violence against those deemed non-believers—this period laid the groundwork for the establishment of contemporary extremist thought and the normalization of extremism and terrorism in the modern Islamic world.

According to the theory of deviance normalization developed by American sociologist Diane Vaughan, deviant behavior, when presented and disseminated as desirable within a society, becomes commonplace and accepted. As such practices become frequent, they are no longer challenged and gradually gain widespread acceptance. Over time, deviance becomes perceived as normal behavior.

This phenomenon is evident in the normalization of extremism in the present era. The activity of various religious factions in the Islamic sphere during the 1970s and 1980s significantly contributed to the propagation of extremist and terrorist ideas among a broad Muslim audience. These factions fostered values of strictness and rigidity, creating an environment conducive to the growth and development of extremist movements. Consequently, extremist and terrorist ideologies became integral to the religious and social landscape, deepening and normalizing extremism. A substantial segment of society began to reject modernity and Western products of that era, exhibiting extremism to the extent of defacing images on banknotes. They also rejected music, singing, heritage, and celebrations, and condemned various practices such as watching television, attending movies, and women's education while enforcing the veil. Additionally, they rejected government jobs and salaries, as these were perceived to be derived from interest-bearing banks, and they opposed banks and their transactions. Their activities extended beyond urban areas to remote villages. This led some individuals to abandon their military and civilian positions and engage in trades like honey, dates, and incense, which became associated with the so-called pious or committed individuals. This period also saw the emergence of the stereotypical appearance of the pious person, including the shortened robe, beard, and use of miswak, and the introduction of the headscarf and gloves for women.

During this era, the concept of Islamic Ummah versus nationalism emerged as a modern doctrinal identity, characterized by an "us versus them" mentality. Such doctrinal identity fostered a sense of alienation among Muslim youth, leading them to reject national culture, identity, and thought. In contrast, an amorphous globalist ideology took root, accompanied by an ideological mobilization known as "culture of frustration," promoted by revivalist thought. This instilled a conspiracy theory mindset among the youth, portraying their societies as intellectually backward, under Western hegemony, and subjected to its constraints. This generated feelings of frustration and hostility toward all things Western, resulting in a desire to change their circumstances and support their causes through hostility toward and combating the West. The sense of alienation from their societies and cultures led some to reject their communities, scholars, and leaders, and seek affiliation with extremist ideologies as a remedy for their frustration.

Upon joining these organizations, individuals' social, cultural, and intellectual alienation was solidified, leading them to undermine their societies and destabilize their security and stability, including turning against their families and relatives, whom they considered ideologically and doctrinally foreign. They derogatorily labeled others as "common folk."

The sense of alienation fostered by extremist ideologies is the primary driver of the behaviors exhibited by some youth involved in terrorist groups. Their detachment from their societies, cultures, and beliefs creates a form of estrangement, leading them to lack empathy, compassion, or respect for their communities, which they instead disdain and view with contempt. This estrangement replaces any sense of belonging with a feeling of

superiority over their communities. As for their governing systems, they see them as tyrannical regimes that should not be supported or obeyed, which is known as political alienation.

The intellectual alienation of these groups throughout history is manifested in their deviation from the consensus of the Muslim community, asserting their views as the only truth while considering others as apostates and infidels whose property and lives are deemed permissible for attack.

All of this has created a psychological isolation or alienation among Muslim youth. This is common among groups with ideological beliefs that deviate from prevailing societal thought, as psychological isolation is the cornerstone from which other forms of alienation emerge, leading individuals to separate themselves spiritually and physically from their society and environment. This detachment drives them to use violence against their communities, considering them enemies that must be fought and eradicated.

Extremist preachers did not limit themselves to promoting doctrinal affiliation but also used it to combat what they termed as the "crusader invasion of the Ummah." Consequently, extremist factions traversed the globe, advocating for the concept of the Ummah, the lands of Muslims, and the necessity of jihad to defend Muslim territories, declaring war against what they labeled as intellectual invasion, and warning against allegiance to infidels. They justified their actions with interpretations relating to the dominance of infidels over Muslims, deviation from religion, sins, weakened religious commitment, and the spread of immorality in Muslim lands. They also engaged in conflicts with those they called "liberals, modernists, and secularists," warning against modernity. Using mosques and pulpits as platforms for their incitement, they established a broad base of followers within the community. The necessity of forming a "jihadist army of the Ummah" was later realized in the formation of Al-Qaeda and its offshoots, most notably ISIS. Thus, this period marked the foundational seeds of extremist thought in the Islamic world, with takfiri fatwas, the expansion of immorality, rejection of modernity, opposition to the West, and extremism in matters of loyalty and disavowal, all contributing to the entrenchment of extremist ideology.

Regarding awareness and preventive measures taken by governments to curb the rise of extremist revivalism, these efforts were largely limited to newspaper articles, rhetorical debates, and seminars between revivalists and those they labeled as modernists, liberals, and secularists. However, modernist proposals generally failed to gain widespread acceptance due to the deep entrenchment and normalization of extremist thought within many segments of society, where deviation from its teachings was considered a departure from religion. Consequently, awareness programs were almost entirely absent. Some governments resorted to security measures against extremist leaders who opposed and incited against their administrations without implementing targeted awareness programs for the public.

### III. The Emergence of Contemporary Terrorism

As previously indicated, the 1970s and 1980s, along with the intellectual conflict between various Islamic factions, established the framework for normalizing extremism in the Islamic world and legitimizing extremist concepts with religious cover. This led to the formation of an ideological army purportedly representing the youth of the Ummah across Islamic countries, claiming to fight infidels. This period saw the rise of what is now termed as the "jihadist revival." Various media, political, and social channels throughout the Islamic and Arab worlds were mobilized to emphasize the importance of jihad, encourage young people to join its ranks, and facilitate their enlistment and funding. Additionally, there was incitement to join the so-called "jihadist ranks" through fatwas, mosque sermons, study circles, and lectures, emphasizing the significance of jihad, supporting Muslims, and liberating Islamic lands as part of defensive jihad.

Moreover, various takfiri groups were introduced into conflict zones, actively disseminating takfiri ideology, inciting youth against their communities and governments, and encouraging them to rebel, branding their states as infidel and their societies as apostate. This introduced the concept of "fighting the near enemy before the distant one," turning these conflict zones into fertile ground for extremist rhetoric, influencing many youths who then applied what they learned in conflict areas to their own communities upon returning home. Consequently, previously normalized extremist thought transformed into violent and bloody terrorist actions directed against their governments, nations, and societies, resulting in widespread killing, destruction, and terrorizing of innocent people across various social strata.

Thus, this period marks the emergence of contemporary religious terrorism. It contributed to the rise of "global jihad" as a prevalent concept and created a network of volunteers and fighters who moved from one conflict to another. It also influenced the political and social orientations of youth in many Islamic countries and impacted the emergence of extremist Islamic groups using jihadist concepts to achieve their objectives.

### Challenges Facing Preventive Intellectual Awareness Programs Against Extremism and Terrorism in Islamic Countries

As previously mentioned, intellectual awareness programs in the Islamic world face numerous religious, social, economic, cultural, technical, media-related, political, and executive challenges that limit their effectiveness and may even lead to their failure if these challenges are not seriously addressed by decision-makers. These

challenges represent the hidden roots of the problem, and it is impossible to eradicate terrorism and extremist ideology without uprooting these roots. This section of the study will discuss the most prominent of these challenges as follows:

#### **IV. Doctrinal and Religious Challenges:**

In the context of implementing intellectual awareness programs to combat terrorism in Islamic and non-Islamic societies, a set of doctrinal challenges emerges that affects the effectiveness of these programs. These challenges relate to religious and intellectual dimensions that may restrict anti-extremism efforts or hinder the acceptance of awareness programs that conflict with deeply rooted religious beliefs in some individuals. These beliefs have become an integral part of the religious and intellectual identity of many, making it difficult to accept or adopt programs that may be seen as a threat to those beliefs.

Doctrinal and religious challenges are a cornerstone in understanding many social, political, and cultural issues related to intellectual extremism in Islamic societies. These challenges cannot be ignored or underestimated, as they are the main guiding force influencing all other aspects of life in Islamic and non-Islamic countries. They play a crucial role in shaping how individuals and groups deal with major issues such as human rights, tolerance, religious freedoms, and social development. They also significantly contribute to shaping the cultural and political identity of societies and determining their interaction with global transformations and changes. In other words, doctrinal and religious challenges extend beyond spiritual aspects to all areas of human life, making them central to shaping policies, laws, and relationships between countries and peoples.

When examining the factors behind the emergence of extremist ideologies that have led to the formation of numerous religiously motivated terrorist organizations, it becomes clear that religious beliefs are the foundation from which all other challenges in combating extremism in the Islamic world, and indeed in most societies, have emerged.

An analysis of Islamic heritage in some societies reveals that certain Islamic sects and factions base their intellectual orientations on doctrines they term “loyalty and disavowal” and “sovereignty.” The doctrine of loyalty and disavowal is a revolutionary creed adopted by some Islamic factions, which excludes those who oppose its teachings. This doctrine has given rise to many takfiri (excommunication) movements and organizations from the second century to the present. The doctrine of loyalty and disavowal governs the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as their relationships with each other, based on belief, sect, or method. This doctrine means loyalty to believers who belong to the same faction or sect, while rejecting loyalty to those classified as “infidels,” “polytheists,” or “apostates” from other Islamic factions. This doctrine, which has spread in many Islamic societies, remains a strong challenge for decision-makers due to its deep-rootedness in the minds of many Muslims who have lived through that era and their descendants. Furthermore, all contemporary takfiri factions and terrorist organizations have emerged from this doctrine.

The educational challenge in addressing such a doctrine lies in the fact that it has become a religious axiom for some Muslims in various Islamic societies, resulting in the division of society into warring factions and creating internal tensions that weaken social cohesion. This has led to the reinforcement of extremist activities, violence, and conflict between different factions and sects within society, and the rejection of values such as tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Therefore, it is difficult to create awareness programs that can mitigate its dangers due to the entrenched and normalized concept of “us vs. them” among some Islamic factions, unless the roots that nurture it are addressed and dried up.

The doctrine of sovereignty, which was also established during the early days by the Kharijites, represents another doctrinal challenge for decision-makers and intellectual awareness program implementers, as it is primarily directed against governments, while the doctrine of loyalty and disavowal is directed at societies. This doctrine makes the people of that faction enemies of the state, viewing it as an apostate state ruled by a tyrant, loyal to infidels, and governed by man-made laws. Therefore, decision-makers face difficulty in implementing effective policies, reforms, or awareness programs if there is discord or opposition based on loyalty and disavowal or sovereignty. This challenge is reflected in the rejection of any intellectual awareness programs offered by governments, which are seen as attempts to manipulate or subjugate to man-made laws, making them unacceptable to some groups. Awareness programs promoting tolerance, social integration, and cooperation between religions or sects may conflict with the doctrine of loyalty and disavowal, which followers of that faction see as distinguishing between believers (us) and non-believers (them). This makes acceptance or engagement with such programs a form of loyalty to non-believers or alignment with ideologies that extremist groups consider un-Islamic. This is perceived as an attempt to undermine the religious identity and legitimacy they hold onto, leading them to view any type of reform or change in thought or Islamic practices as a threat to religious constants.

#### **Technical Challenges**

Islamic countries face complex technical challenges in implementing intellectual awareness programs to combat terrorism, especially in light of the evolving nature of extremist thought and the changing methods used by extremist groups. Despite the technological capabilities of some countries, they may struggle to keep pace with the rapid advancements in terrorist information, which can quickly spread through social media and digital platforms, making it difficult to track and stop. Additionally, extremists regularly adapt to evade surveillance systems through techniques such as using encrypted languages or unfamiliar codes, complicating efforts to identify and prevent harmful content.

The technical complexity is further exacerbated by the diversity of languages and cultures in some Islamic societies, making it challenging to design effective awareness programs on a large scale. Each nationality requires customized strategies that align with their culture and language. Furthermore, blocking extremist websites has become less effective, as those behind extremist websites rely on advanced technologies such as data encryption, evading censorship, and regularly changing web addresses to avoid blocking. They also use virtual private networks (VPNs) and proxies to bypass restrictions.

On the other hand, the challenge extends beyond extremists to users seeking access to blocked extremist content. VPNs allow them to bypass geographical restrictions by encrypting their connection and redirecting it through servers in other countries, making it difficult for internet service providers or authorities to detect prohibited activities. Additionally, extremists do not limit themselves to one platform; they spread across various social media platforms, private networks, and dark web sites. Some terrorist groups receive external funding and support, enhancing their ability to develop extremist content and evade censorship. This makes the challenge significant for countries to develop advanced internet monitoring capabilities, including artificial intelligence and data analysis, to detect suspicious activities and extremist messages. However, many Islamic countries experiencing terrorist activities lack the necessary technical infrastructure to implement effective awareness or surveillance programs, such as advanced internet monitoring systems and artificial intelligence.

Countries with the capability to implement awareness programs and block extremist websites may face difficulty in building public trust if these programs are perceived as part of state efforts or if they carry unconvincing messages. Additionally, digital illiteracy, prevalent in some Islamic countries, leads to a lack of understanding among individuals in those societies about how to use technology safely, making them more susceptible to extremist content.

### **Social and Psychological Challenges**

In most prevention and treatment strategies for terrorism, social and psychological factors that drive individuals to join terrorist organizations, support them, sympathize with their members, or adopt extremist ideas are often overlooked. Efforts and scientific research typically focus primarily on religious factors, assuming they are the main and sole motivators driving individuals to extremism, joining terrorist organizations, or adopting extremist ideas driven by religious or ideological motives or a misunderstanding of religion.

However, in-depth studies conducted in some Islamic societies have shown otherwise. It has been found that social and psychological factors are among the primary influences on the decision to join or support terrorist activities or adopt extremist ideas. Among these factors and motivations identified are the difficult living conditions faced by some individuals in many Islamic societies, such as social and familial marginalization, family breakdown, psychological issues, and feelings of inferiority. These factors often lead individuals to make the decision to “escape reality” to any entity that might save them from their circumstances and give them a sense of belonging and elevation.

The sense of belonging is a natural human trait, and thus, individuals who feel alienated from the society in which they live or feel marginalized often seek an alternative community that provides them with a sense of security and pride. Emotional isolation, or what is known as psychological alienation, is common in different eras among groups that adopt an ideological thought different from the prevailing thought in society. Emotional isolation or psychological alienation is the cornerstone from which other forms of alienation emerge, leading to behaviors and actions that result in a person becoming spiritually and physically disconnected from the society and environment in which they live.

Therefore, the sense of belonging provided by terrorist organizations or cells to their members is one of the most prominent methods that make some individuals more attached to them and eager to join. Hence, containment is one of the most widespread methods of recruitment, especially for individuals who feel socially marginalized or oppressed due to social, economic, or political factors. These organizations offer them promises of justice, power, and liberation from marginalization, making them feel a sense of identity, belonging, brotherhood, and a cohesive community within the organization, becoming part of a distinguished group that offers them the support, protection, and power they lack in their lives.

Additionally, reinforcement and elevation techniques are used by active leaders in the organization or cell with newly recruited members, especially those known to suffer from social or economic problems or social or familial marginalization. Terrorist cell leaders resort to using reinforcement and elevation techniques for some

members by exaggerating praise or assigning them leadership tasks to give them confidence in themselves. Sometimes, group members are instructed to show admiration and provide services to that member.

This type of method is often used with members whom the organization's leaders intend to ensure loyalty to the cell or organization and then push them into suicide operations. This method is also used with some members who have been released from prison, where the fleeing cell members visit them after their release from prison and convince them to return to the cell, reassuring them that the situation is better and that the youth eagerly await their return, praising them as important members whose place cannot be filled. This ensures their continued loyalty and belonging. What also contributes to some individuals accepting a return to the organization or cell is the societal rejection and stigma they face, being labeled as terrorists, and being abandoned by everyone, leaving them with no choice but to return to the organization or cell, which welcomes them. This is in addition to the lack of post-release care and the underlying reasons that initially led them to join the organization, which are mostly psychological, social, or economic problems. Upon release, these issues may have intensified, pushing them to return.

Another social factor attributed to some individuals' involvement in extremist organizations or adopting extremist ideologies is peer influence or friendships, which are often a strong source of influence, especially on young people and adolescents. Peers and friends often represent the primary reference source for most of their behaviors, which can be termed "peer influence," one of the most influential factors on an individual's character during adolescence and youth.

Although friendships are generally reciprocal, meaning that each party influences the other, the strength and type of influence depend on the individual's personality, whether it is an influential, leadership personality or a submissive, follower personality. Thus, a leadership friend with extremist ideas often influences a weaker personality friend, convincing them to adopt their extremist views and thereby dragging them into the clutches of extremism or deviance, a phenomenon known as the "dragging relationship." Friends are a significant source of social influence identified in many studies as a primary factor in adopting extremist ideologies. Therefore, peer influence is one of the main avenues often used in any awareness program due to the strong influence peers have on each other, whether negatively or positively, known as "peer education."

Some individuals may fall victim to what can be termed a "relationship of imitation or emulation," where a person is directly influenced by their father, brother, teacher, relative, or a radical cleric they consider a role model. Since the culture of imitation and emulation usually flows from the younger to the older, either in age or status, and is generally a traditional, not equal, relationship, the person influenced is often in the role of executor, imitating the instructions or actions of the influential person, either out of conviction or coercion. The decision to join or support extremist organizations or adopt their ideology may be under coercion, which can be termed a "coercive relationship." This relationship takes two forms:

1. The first form: A relationship between a stronger personality and a weaker personality, such as the relationship between a father and son, or an older brother and younger brother, or a husband and wife, where the weaker party is coerced into adopting the beliefs of the stronger party, and thus forced to adopt their ideas or accompany them in traveling to conflict zones, joining the cell, or engaging in terrorist activities. Especially since family authority remains strong in many Islamic societies, where family and community play a significant role in shaping individuals' views. If family or community values indirectly support extremist ideas or do not endorse moderate values, they often force the person to reject awareness programs or even allow those implementing them to present them if the programs are offered directly.
2. The other form of coercive relationship is within the organization or cell, where the relationship between the leader and the member is characterized by blind obedience without question or discussion. In terrorist organizations, the general principle is that questions should only be asked as necessary. Therefore, members are forced to execute orders even if they do not believe in the organization's ideology or plans, but they comply due to the pressure imposed on them, either through threats, intimidation, or accusations of cowardice, treason, or failing to support their comrades and religion. Coercive relationships can also take other forms, such as some terrorist organizations forcing new members to surrender their passports or forcing them to burn or tear them up to ensure their continued connection with the organization and prevent them from considering returning or escaping. They may also sever any external connections by confiscating their phones and anything that links them to their families, preventing them from contacting any of them. Thus, they use force, threats, and pressure to influence members and force them into terrorist activities or supporting the organization's goals without their free consent or personal will. Sometimes coercion involves blackmailing members by gathering sensitive or embarrassing information about them and threatening to expose it if they do not cooperate with the terrorist organization or carry out terrorist missions.

There is another type of relationship known as "relationship of confirmation," where the person, who already holds extremist views voluntarily, seeks out suspicious websites and contacts extremist figures to confirm their beliefs. This type of relationship involves individuals who share the same views and beliefs that the person

already holds and seeks to reinforce and deepen. Therefore, the person seeks to confirm their faith and reinforce their beliefs by seeking out figures who confirm their beliefs and give them a foundation.

Accordingly, the person with some extremist beliefs seeks out people who share the same visions, principles, and intellectual positions, listening to their ideas and opinions, interacting with them, exchanging experiences and knowledge with them, which reinforces the idea in their mind and strengthens their belief in it. This makes them feel reassured and confirms this idea, adopting it more firmly, which influences their behavior and decisions, driving them to implement it as behavior in the real world. It is worth noting that this may lead to the person isolating themselves from others who do not share their views, affecting their social interaction and cooperation with others outside their intellectual circle. This type of relationship is considered the most dangerous because it originates from the person themselves; they seek to develop this relationship rather than it being imposed on them.

This confirmatory type of relationship overlaps with another type known as a "relationship of benefit," where the individual joins the extremist organization driven by the desire to gain a benefit. This relationship involves the influenced person seeking to build a relationship with the influencer to obtain a benefit, such as money, shelter, or fulfilling some needs. In this case, the influenced person is often in a position of weakness, making them more likely to follow the instructions of the influencer and execute them to please them. This type of relationship was particularly prominent in ISIS.

Other social characteristics such as education level, profession, or marital status represent significant challenges in designing any awareness program. When examining the relationship between education and the likelihood of success of awareness programs against extremist ideologies, it becomes clear that illiteracy represents a large proportion of the population in many Islamic societies, making it difficult for any awareness program to achieve its goals, especially if it is a digital program, as this segment cannot access such programs or understand them. While semi-educated individuals, who hold a high school diploma or less and represent the majority of those joining extremist organizations, may be able to access awareness content, they often do not pay much attention to these programs because they conflict with their interests and aspirations, which they believe might be realized through their affiliation with extremist organizations. These organizations offer them the allure of acceptance, sympathy, belonging, shelter, income, and elevation, fulfilling their social, psychological, and physical needs that they believe can be met by joining these terrorist organizations, especially since the majority of this segment are young, single men who see the allure of marriage, captives, and financial rewards as an important goal they seek, as was the case during the ISIS era, where this type of recruitment was a significant means of joining the organization by single young men who could not marry due to high dowries and marriage costs.

In conclusion, social and psychological challenges may be among the strongest challenges facing planners or implementers of any awareness program, especially if these programs conflict with the psychological and social needs of the target audience. If these needs are not addressed, no awareness program can succeed, and the target segments will not respond to any awareness program, no matter how strong it is, because it does not meet their social and psychological needs, which they seek to fulfill through their affiliation with terrorist organizations, or because some do not have control over their own decisions.

## V. Cultural Challenges

Cultural challenges in any society represent a significant obstacle for decision-makers or planners and implementers of any awareness programs. The prevailing culture in any society, along with the associated customs, values, and beliefs, guides individuals, especially in traditional, non-urban societies, such as Bedouin, tribal, and rural communities. Since most Islamic societies still have a significant proportion of their population living in traditional, tribal, or rural communities, it is impossible to implement any programs that conflict with the values, customs, and beliefs held by the people in that society. For example, harboring or sheltering wanted individuals, considered a crime punishable by law in international law, is not considered such in tribal customs in all tribal communities wherever they exist. The system of "protection," known in security terminology as "harboring or sheltering," remains deeply rooted in tribal customs in all societies. This type of behavior involves a person sheltering or protecting one or some of the wanted individuals from their community, relatives, or tribe, considering them as someone seeking protection, whom they are obliged to protect and defend, even if it leads to imprisonment, as long as the matter does not bring shame to the protector but rather becomes a source of pride in front of their community and tribe.

Sheltering and protecting may also be based on doctrinal support rather than ethnic or tribal affiliation. A person may shelter one or some wanted individuals outside their tribe or relatives, not out of tribal or familial support but based on doctrinal support. This pattern is perhaps more common today among members of terrorist organizations.

Moreover, supporting a law-breaking relative, even in terrorism cases, and providing them with social and financial support, is considered a social obligation in tribal customs in societies where tribal systems prevail, even if that person is breaking the law. This finding is extremely important because it is impossible to ignore the

culture of a society that does not consider such an act shameful but rather sees it as a duty. Some crimes are not considered shameful in tribal customs but are instead seen as acts of manhood, such as arms smuggling. Even if the purpose of these smuggled weapons is to be used against security forces or to harm the internal security of the community, it cannot be considered a crime in tribal culture. Smuggling is one of the newly criminalized acts by the system in all societies, but in tribal customs, it is considered an act of manhood, and the perpetrator does not feel shame before their community or tribe, even if they are imprisoned. Such customs pose challenges to the security system in societies with a tribal structure. What may be considered a violation in the official system may not be seen as such in tribal customs, making any awareness programs that do not take into account the cultural dimension of the society unlikely to succeed or gain acceptance, regardless of their quality. People view such programs as interference in their cultural privacy, leading them to resist or ignore awareness messages.

### **Economic Challenges**

Economic factors are among the most likely drivers for individuals to adopt extremist ideologies. Economic conditions, such as poverty, unemployment, and economic crises, may push some individuals to join extremist groups or carry out their plans under the pressure of financial need. With the increasing number of unemployed youth in some Islamic societies, rising living costs, widening poverty, and limited economic opportunities, some young people may be driven to extremist organizations as a means of expressing their anger and achieving some social and economic gains. Unemployment can also lead to weakened social and cultural attachment, causing youth to feel marginalized and discriminated against, which may drive some to violence as a way to express their anger, defend their identity, and search for identity. Thus, unemployment and financial need are the most prominent factors leading to involvement in extremist behavior. Extremist organizations have recognized this and have encouraged people with no income to engage in sabotage and terrorist activities in exchange for financial rewards.

Despite this, economic factors and financial motivations have not received the same level of deep research attention as religious factors. In a study conducted by Asiri (2016), which included an analysis of about a thousand studies on intellectual extremism and terrorism over twenty years, the economic dimension of the problem was not sufficiently addressed. This research neglect may be attributed to the belief that the economic dimension was not a major factor driving young people to travel to Afghanistan during the Afghan war in the Al-Qaeda era, where jihadist movements included all social and economic classes of youth in Arab and Islamic societies under the pretext of jihad, rather than financial or socio-economic motivations. However, this may have been true only in the early stages, but later, poverty and unemployment cannot be ignored as the most prominent factors driving young people to join extremist organizations that provide them with shelter, food, and money, pushing income-deprived youth to join them as these organizations become their only source of livelihood, making them more vulnerable to control and manipulation. It is worth noting that terrorist organizations, whether in conflict zones or in their affiliated cells, from the Al-Qaeda era to ISIS, offer what is known as the "sponsorship system." This system includes providing monthly stipends to individuals during their time with the organization, in addition to providing housing and care for their families if necessary. These benefits enable the organizations to attract some unemployed youth.

Another dimension of this challenge for the designers and implementers of intellectual awareness programs on extremism and terrorism lies in the financial lure offered by extremist organizations, not only to those suffering from poverty or unemployment but also extending their strategies to include individuals who have stable economic conditions or prestigious social positions, such as engineers, doctors, linguists, scientists in various fields, and others. By offering lucrative financial offers, salaries, and benefits, they can be enticing enough to convince some individuals from high professional backgrounds to join their ranks, carry out terrorist activities, or provide logistical support to the organization, even if they do not have an urgent financial need. These individuals do not necessarily have to believe in the organization's ideology and beliefs but rather use their expertise to achieve the organization's goals, whether in terrorist activities, logistical planning, or providing medical care to the organization's members, or even distributing and smuggling drugs, or arms smuggling, and other logistical services. Terrorist organizations may use pressure and persuasion tactics to influence individuals with high expertise in a particular field who are under financial pressure, increasing their willingness to engage in the organization's activities or support it logistically, even if they do not believe in its goals and ideology.

At the official level for some Islamic countries, economic challenges represent a significant problem for some countries classified as poor and unable to finance intellectual awareness programs. Obtaining sufficient funds to implement awareness programs is one of the main challenges in many countries, leading to limited or nonexistent budgets allocated to combating terrorism and extremism. These countries may exclude awareness programs altogether, especially since such programs require sustainable funding to ensure their continuity and effectiveness. Securing long-term funding can be difficult, especially if the government budget is unstable or if there is a lack of support from the private sector or international donors. Additionally, such countries with limited budgets may not even believe in the importance of intellectual awareness programs, seeing the money

spent on these programs as reducing the budgets allocated to other areas such as education, healthcare, and other development programs that they deem more necessary for their societies.

Thus, it becomes clear that the economic challenges associated with designing and implementing intellectual awareness programs manifest in three main dimensions that are difficult for decision-makers to ignore. The first is the widespread poverty and unemployment in many Islamic countries, driving some individuals to join extremist organizations or carry out their agendas in pursuit of meeting their financial and living needs. The second dimension is the ability of extremist organizations to attract and recruit individuals who do not suffer from financial hardship but possess expertise, positions, and prestigious specializations, where money lures them into carrying out logistical or terrorist activities. Finally, the third dimension is the inability of many Islamic countries to effectively implement intellectual awareness programs due to their weak financial resources, affecting their ability to effectively address these challenges.

### Media Challenges

Islamic countries face significant media challenges in their efforts to combat extremist ideologies and terrorism. Terrorist organizations recognized the importance of media in spreading ideology, recruitment, and attraction from the beginning of what was known as "Jihadist Media" during the Afghan war, which branched into various forms, including print, radio, television, and combat videos, often referred to as "Jihadist." During that era, magazines and periodicals were among the most prominent media arms, with "Jihad Magazine" being the most famous. It was almost exclusively directed at Arab fighters, as it published news about those participating in battles, making it a powerful influence in attracting young people to travel to Afghanistan.

It is worth noting that the periodicals, newspapers, and all forms of what was known as "Jihadist Media" created the symbolic leaders of terrorist organizations and turned them into legends. They also laid the foundation for what became known as "Jihadist Media," which continues to this day and constantly evolves, becoming the strongest weapon in the war and the main tool for recruitment and the creation of terrorist symbols. It now has highly professional and skilled specialists working under the banner of "electronic jihad," which emerged after the proliferation of the internet, encompassing all social media platforms, or what can be called "social media," to spread extremist ideologies and violent propaganda, using internet platforms to publish videos, statements, and articles promoting extremism and attracting young people.

It is worth noting that the journals, newspapers, and what is known as "jihadist media" in all its forms have played a pivotal role in creating the icons of terrorist organization leaders, turning them into legends. This also laid the foundation for what came to be known as "jihadist media," which continues to evolve and has now become the most potent weapon in the war, serving as the main tool for recruitment and the creation of terrorist symbols. Highly professional and skilled specialists now operate under the name of "electronic jihad," which emerged with the advent of the internet, encompassing all social media platforms, or what could be termed "social media," to spread extremist ideologies and violent propaganda. These platforms are used to disseminate videos, statements, and articles that promote extremism and recruit the youth.

This shift in the strategies of extremist organizations from traditional media to digital media coincided with another transformation within the Islamic world: a decline in religious fervor among the youth, with many moving away from practicing religious rituals such as prayer and fasting, opting instead for a form of religiosity that focuses more on cultural traditions and identity rather than strict religious adherence or traditional religious practices. This led some religious currents to claim the spread of atheism among the youth in Islamic societies, although this does not necessarily reflect reality. Atheism, which denotes a lack of belief in a deity, is a different matter altogether. The cultural religiosity observed among youth across all religions, whether divine or secular, implies neither a rejection of religion as an identity nor a denial of God. In fact, many of these youths defend the core tenets of the religion they belong to, yet they do not engage in religious practices such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, nor do they consistently engage in practices like reading the Qur'an or attending communal prayers in mosques.

This shift in the religious inclinations of youth and adolescents in both Islamic and non-Islamic societies has aided terrorist organizations in expanding their activities and strategies by facilitating digital recruitment targeting new groups of individuals, including younger age groups. Additionally, terrorist organizations now target anyone who has access to the internet, regardless of age. The shift to digital recruitment has also led to significant advancements in how terrorist organizations operate, enabling cross-continental recruitment that is no longer confined to specific communities. These organizations can now reach individuals from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds worldwide.

Moreover, digital recruitment has given rise to new methods, such as using online games as a means to recruit children and young people. These games, especially those available online, offer an attractive and interactive environment that captivates younger players, making them an effective platform for recruitment. Through these games, organizations can subtly introduce extremist messages and ideologies, making their influence more covert. As a result, terrorist cells composed of young individuals have formed in some Arab and Islamic communities, showing loyalty to ISIS, having been recruited through these games. Additionally, the

phenomenon of "lone wolves," individuals recruited online to carry out solo attacks against their communities, has emerged. This digital transformation in the activities of terrorist organizations poses a significant challenge to governments and policymakers in both Islamic and non-Islamic societies in addressing this issue. With the cross-age targeting, the number of people who can be influenced by extremist ideologies increases, making it more challenging to identify and effectively manage the targeted individuals. Furthermore, children and youth subjected to this type of digital recruitment are often threatened by the organization if they fail to carry out orders to commit terrorist acts or assassinate certain individuals, including relatives, creating an unsafe environment at both societal and familial levels.

The media challenge for decision-makers and implementers of intellectual awareness programs lies in the fact that terrorist media receives support, funding, and sponsorship from some countries with vested interests in fostering terrorism in certain areas for political or economic reasons. This makes terrorist media highly sophisticated in quality, production, and impact, using emotional stimulation tactics by sometimes provoking jealousy over the honor of Muslims and their support. This is done by depicting the suffering of Muslims to arouse individuals' emotional feelings and channeling them in calculated ways, portraying Muslims as victims and oppressed in the world, amplifying their suffering and the injustice they face, and showing images and reports of violence directed against them in conflict and war zones to incite anger and revenge and to motivate people to support them.

It is important to note that the emotional stimulation method is the core content of other methods, forming the centerpiece of Jihadist films, speeches, lectures, seminars, news bulletins, and organizational websites. This makes it the most dangerous and influential method on the psyche, especially for those whose emotions govern their behavior more than reason. On the other hand, terrorist media has excelled in using other methods, including enthusiastic stimulation, which is achieved by producing and displaying combat films that portray terrorist operations and attacks in an inciting and enthusiastic manner, depicting fighters known as "Jihadists" in a heroic and courageous light, which excites the audience.

This was the case before the advent of the internet, and it continued during the ISIS era, but it became more widespread through the internet, especially after the advent of YouTube and the ease of uploading videos, which generalized its use in the second and third stages. All terrorist organizations, from Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Al-Nusra, and others, now publish such films, which they call "Jihadist," as the main means of influence. Subsequently, many chants and anthems emerged, and even ISIS, for example, adopted a special anthem (Salil al-Sawarim) as an anthem for the organization and widely disseminated it, making it one of the most influential tools in exciting young people. Among the methods used by terrorist organizations to incite enthusiasm among young people, specifically in the first and second phases of Al-Qaeda, was what they called the "miracles of martyrs." They wrote books and gave lectures to emphasize this concept. In the ISIS phase, this method took a different form, consisting of showing the organization's extreme violence, such as burning enemies, mutilating them, and killing them en masse in front of others, to show the organization's strength and its claimed ability to confront what they called "the enemies of Islam" and "infidels, apostates, agents, and the henchmen of tyrants," referring to "security forces." This method had a powerful influence on young people joining the organization, especially those who felt anger toward major powers or those who lived marginalized lives in economically and socially deprived conditions in their homelands.

Therefore, counter-media and awareness media addressing the dangers of terrorist organizations that appeal to reason may not achieve the desired success in neutralizing and refuting terrorist media, which appeals to emotions. It cannot succeed unless the same emotional methods are used with higher quality and strength than those used by terrorist organizations.. However, this feature may not be achievable for many Islamic countries facing challenges related to the lack of financial and technical resources needed to create high-quality and effective media content. Additionally, there may be a lack of training and skills among those working in this field to produce highly impactful media messages. Often, many Islamic countries lack strong and effective counter-messages to counteract extremist ideologies. Weak or unattractive messages cannot achieve success or influence.

### **Security and Political Challenges**

Creators of awareness content on extremist ideologies and terrorism in Islamic countries face a series of political and security challenges. In some Islamic countries, government institutions and civil society organizations suffer from a lack of public trust in their governments, leading to the rejection of awareness messages coming from them. When there is a weak relationship between the ruling authority and the public, awareness messages, no matter how sincere and purposeful, may be interpreted by some as threats and orders to comply and submit.

Moreover, working in the field of countering extremism may expose content creators to direct security risks from extremist groups or their sympathizers, such as threats of violence or retaliation, making it difficult for these individuals to carry out their work effectively and safely. This is especially true after terrorist organizations shifted from fighting what they called the distant enemy, referring to major powers, to advocating for fighting the near enemy, referring to local governments and those working in the security field, both military and civilian, whom they label as "slaves of tyrants." This escalation has even extended to inciting the killing of relatives and family members who work in the security sector. All of this may limit the production of effective awareness content on extremist ideologies.

Geopolitical challenges involve international support from certain countries for extremist organizations, both financially and logistically, as these organizations act as proxies providing mercenary fighters to serve the interests of those countries in targeted regions, giving these organizations power that is difficult for some countries to counter. It is also challenging to create effective programs to prevent individuals from joining or cooperating with them, as these organizations become a source of livelihood for some individuals, as mentioned earlier. All of these factors increase the challenge for decision-makers in confronting these organizations and raising awareness of their dangers.

### **Executive Challenges**

Most Islamic countries suffer from a lack or absence of qualification, training, and expertise in the field of extremism and terrorism. Most countries lack qualified and trained experts in these fields, including media, production, and impactful scenarios. Implementing digital awareness programs may not be possible in some cases when there are difficulties in accessing modern technology or effectively using social media, hindering the programs from reaching their target audience. This is due to the lack of smartphones, internet access, and computers among a wide segment of the population, especially in less technologically developed areas, making it difficult for individuals in those communities to access digital awareness content easily.

As a result, some countries resort to alternative awareness methods such as community seminars, lectures, and printed brochures, which are less effective, especially for the youth, and may have limited impact on non-targeted segments such as the elderly or the illiterate.

### **VI. Conclusion**

In conclusion, we can question whether there is still a need for digital awareness programs in light of societal awareness of the reality of extremist organizations. Counter-awareness programs have contributed to exposing the flaws of these organizations and revealing their ugly face, in addition to the realization of the reality of these organizations by young people who returned from conflict zones and clarified the reality and falsehood of terrorist organizations to their peers. Moreover, due to globalization, there has been a shift in thinking among young people in many Islamic societies, with some, if not many, of them turning to what is known as "cultural Islam" or not practicing certain rituals and acts of worship, limiting their religious identity to cultural aspects. However, this religious shift has not deterred terrorist organizations from continuing recruitment efforts, especially since devout young people are no longer the primary target for these organizations as much as those with expertise capable of providing logistical services, or young people and minors who are pushed into individual or suicide operations.

Thus, the answer is yes, the need exists to develop comprehensive preventive strategies for digital education, family awareness, and ensuring cooperation between family and school. All of this cannot be achieved in the absence of security control, content monitoring, and punitive measures. Awareness and education alone are not effective unless accompanied by strict security control and severe penalties, as "God deters with the ruler what cannot be deterred by the Qur'an." Security and stability cannot be achieved through education and awareness alone without being accompanied by stringent systems and laws that are well-known and applied to everyone, and by fighting with weapons and men. Throughout history, from the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs to the present, awareness programs have not been effective with ideologues; they are only deterred by the sword and confrontation with strong men, and force with force, as "iron is only cut by iron." If all of this does not succeed, there is only divine punishment left, which God mentioned as a deterrent, where He said: "Indeed, the penalty for those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive upon earth [to cause] corruption is none but that they be killed or crucified or that their hands and feet be cut off from opposite sides or that they be exiled from the land. That is for them a disgrace in this world, and for them in the Hereafter is a great punishment" (Al-Ma'idah: 33).

Furthermore, no awareness programs on terrorism and extremism can be successful if all the social and economic causes leading to the adoption of extremist thought or its practice as terrorist behavior are not addressed. The principle of blocking means in Islamic Sharia precedes bringing benefits.

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