

Radicalisation and de-radicalisation of social movements: The comeback of political Islam?

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Abstract Forty years after Mathiesen wrote the ‘politics of abolition’ his work can enhance our understanding about radicalisation and de-radicalisation of social movements and terrorist groups. In ‘the politics of abolition’ Mathiesen explains the mechanism of two social factors that moderate the most contested goals and means of abolitionists groups. Due to these mechanisms, abolitionist movements often split into one rather moderate and one ‘radical’ current. The Islamist movement is an empirical example for the split the model predicts. Jihadism (e.g. al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups) represents the most radical form of contemporary Islamism, while nationalist Islamism (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood) and non-jihadi fundamentalism (mainstream Salafism) can be considered less radical because these currents either dismissed their abolitionist goals in favour of political integration, or reject terrorist violence as a means to enforce abolitionist goals. The communiqués and public statements of al-Qaeda give insight into the discourse within the Islamist movement. A sample of jihadi media is reviewed in this article as to compare al-Qaeda’s political positions with those of other Islamist movements and organisations.

Introduction

This article applies Thomas Mathiesen’s model of “the unfinished” [1] to a contemporary abolitionist group: al-Qaeda (AQ), whose goal is the abolition of the “religion of democracy”¹ and secular governance in general. It is indeed intriguing to see how well the model applies not only to the academic research on al-Qaeda but also to the discourse of the jihadi movement itself. Academics, journalists and al-Qaeda alike distinguish between four currents of Islamism. The model helps to explain the analytical and phenomenological differences between these currents as well as some of the social forces

¹ as a treatise of the famous ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdese is called. An English translation of the book can be downloaded at his website <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/democracy-a-relegoin.pdf>

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