Militant Jihadism

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Introduction

Territorial victory against the IS’s Caliphate did not eradicate the organisation, nor did it end its ideological appeal. The previous chapters in this volume carefully scrutinised various aspects of jihadist transformation and attempted to identify future scenarios. This chapter has a different yet complementary concern. It rather looks at the Muslim critiques of jihadist militancy, evaluates their counter-arguments and tries to provide some future reflections on their counter-religious strategy. IS’s propaganda has mainly targeted and appealed to Sunni Muslims. The following analysis accordingly focuses on Sunni counter-responses. To make the analysis sharper and more viable, it considers four leading Sunni institutions from the four Sunni-majority countries: al-Azhar al-Sharif (Azhar) in Egypt, Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Diyanet) in Turkey, Nahdatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia and al-Rabita al-Muhammadiyya lil-‘Ulama’ (RMU) in Morocco. Each country and institution has a particular significance for the political history of the Sunni world.

Founded in 760, Azhar is the oldest surviving Sunni academy, and perhaps the most prominent and global Sunni authority. Founded in 1926, NU is arguably the largest Sunni organisation with a following of about 90 million in the most populous Muslim nation. It was established by the traditional Indonesian ulama as a response to the emergence of the modernist/reformist agenda of its competitor Muhammadiyah at home and abroad to the emergence of the
Saudi state with a puritanist agenda and the emergence of Turkey with a secular agenda. Diyanet was founded in 1924 just after the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate and religious bureaucracy. It was originally created as a religious state apparatus to manage religious services in the newly established secular Turkey. For the last 15 years, it has become indisputably the highest religious authority and a convenient tool to govern the religious sphere in the hands of successive political Islamist governments. Although originally established in 1960 by the traditional Qarawiyyin-linked ulama, RMU was substantially transformed into a consulting body following the post-2004 reforms that aimed to restructure the religious field as a response to increasing extremism and terror in the country. Its institutional design and privileged position suggest that the monarchy intends it to be the leading and most progressive institution in Morocco’s religious establishment (Bruce, 2015; Wainscott, 2017).

Each institution recently adopted a particular mission to deconstruct the jihadist discourse and to face contemporary jihadist militancy. This chapter first synoptically analyses these institutions’ Sunni critiques of jihadist organisations and later critically evaluates their counter-theological strategies. Secondly, it explores how these institutions cooperate or negotiate with their respective political authorities and how this would affect their religious authority and their fight against Islamic extremism. In so doing, it also reflects on future possibilities.

### Muslim Critiques of Jihadist Militancy

A very common and frequent Muslim critique is the complaint that the atrocities of jihadist militants “tarnish the image of Islam.” Almost all leading Sunni groups and scholars accuse IS and similar organisations of having defamed Islam’s “lofty” and “noble” teachings. They are blamed for having discredited the peace message of Islam whose very name means “peace.” Countering Islamist militancy thus becomes a primary religious duty in their view in order to save the image of Islam. From this accusation ensue other further critiques that frame their counter-arguments. First, they question the sincerity of jihadists. Although the latter often emphasise that they fight for the sake of God’s cause, they are viewed as those who abuse religious feelings and teachings for their political and self interest. They are those who do the most harm to Islam. A repeated argument is that statistically Muslim victims of bombings and massacres perpetrated by
the jihadists outnumber non-Muslims, and it is the Muslims themselves who suffer most. The jihadist militants thus cannot be honest in their claim of saving and upholding Islam, given that their actions usually hurt Muslim believers and estrange many from Islamic ideals. Secondly, they therefore hold jihadists responsible for the accelerating Islamophobia, hate crimes and the perceived or real discrimination Muslim citizens face, particularly in Western countries. The extremism of jihadist militancy, they reason, is often responded to by the far-right, anti-Islamic extremism. Thirdly, the extremists damage Islam because they fail to understand that Islam indeed principally supports peace and safety. The messages and statements of the four institutions indicate, sooner or later, that Islam encourages reconciliation, co-existence, stability and security. An emphasis here is that not just Islam but also other belief systems do not justify terrorism. Like others, Islam values human life. They also argue that Islamic history has had a relatively better record of handling minorities.

In lamenting that the image of Islam is seriously eclipsed by the jihadist insurgency, the Muslim critiques often question the militants’ declared objectives and intentions. They identify a clear contrast between what they want to achieve and what they end up with. The contradiction is explained with an attempt to define who these violent people and organisations really are. How they are defined, in turn, frames what kind of counter-religious strategy they seek or employ. It should, however, be noted that various depictions often appear simultaneously in their analyses. Jihadists are described as “bad” or “ignorant” Muslims that are unaware or disregardful of the universal message of Islam. Azhar, for instance, refused to declare the jihadist militants as infidels. Following a fatwa in an Azhar event in December 2014 by the Nigerian Mufti who called members of IS apostates, an Azhar statement rejected such call. The statement claimed that they are indeed Muslims, although their actions do not represent Islamic values. “No believer can be declared an apostate, regardless of his sins,” it reads (cited in Fouad, 2015). On another occasion, Shaykh al-Azhar indicated that IS militants “practise corruption on earth.” They should hence receive similar punishment (i.e. execution) ordained in Islamic law for such violent insurrections. They are, however, “grave sinners” but not infidels (cited in Saker, 2017). Against criticisms that consider this stance as appeasing, Azhar’s counter-argument states that its theological and institutional position does not allow them to make such a declaration: Sunni orthodoxy dictates that anyone who believes in God and resurrection cannot be infidel and IS people believe in both. Azhar is not an authority for such a denunciation; hence this is not its
business. Such a denunciation would put Azhar on the same footing as IS (cited in Mustafa, 2014).

Although not as explicit as Azhar, others are also reluctant to declare Islamist militants apostates. Diyanet and RMU, for instance, do not directly discuss the Muslimness of IS. Their reluctance rests heavily upon their wish not to vindicate the excommunicatory stance of jihadist organisations. They criticise their exclusivist outlook with reference to the traditional Sunni principle that anyone who worships God by turning their face to al-Ka’ba cannot be excommunicated. Declaring IS or others as infidels would hence negate this principle, they reason. This is why these people appear in Sunni counter-discourse as malevolent “heretics”, whose interpretations evidently deviate from Muslim orthodoxy. Diyanet, for instance, accuses IS ideologues of “lacking the proper methodology” (usulsüzlik) in applying Islamic fundamentals in a given context. In its view, they rather pursue an “eclectic pragmatism” where normative sources are read selectively for practical purposes (Diyanet, 2016: 6-7). RMU has launched a book series called “Islam and Contemporary Context” to directly “dismantle the extremist discourse.” These books blame IS for failing to consider the “higher objectives of Islamic legislation” (maqasid al-shari’a) and accordingly end up with “misguided paths and evil deviations.” Many Azhar statements similarly accuse the jihadists of being deviant from orthodox Islam, misreading normative Islamic texts and spreading heretical extremist ideas. They are held responsible for the contemporary “misinterpretation” of Qur’anic concepts, prophetic tradition and Islamic history. For al-Tayyib, their ideology violates and is in clear contrast to teachings of Islam; thus it is already regarded as heretical (al-Tayyib, 2014a). Likewise, Ahmad Mustofa Bisri, NU’s spiritual leader, stated in an interview (cited in Cochrane, 2015) that the message of the extremist groups “spread of a shallow understanding of Islam” whose interpretations are “grievously mistaken.” He stated that “according to the Sunni view of Islam, every aspect and expression of religion should be imbued with love and compassion, and foster the perfection of human nature.” The representatives of these leading Sunni organisations complain about the heresy brought by the contemporary jihadist movement whose followers “distort” Islamic ideals, Qur’anic concepts and prophetic practice. As we shall see, they differ in explaining the nature and causes of jihadist distortion. Yet they agree that the Islamist militants are indeed religiously heretical people.

On the other hand, they usually describe followers of jihadist organisations, especially IS, as those who are deceived by “foreign powers” to maintain their
political, financial and sectarian interests. They however differ in identifying these foreign powers and their aims. NU and RMU put more blame on Middle Eastern countries, namely S. Arabia and Iran, while Diyanet and Azhar primarily blame Western colonial struggle for the global acceleration of violent extremism. The difference arises from how each organisation explains the relationship between violence and Islam as well as how textual and contextual factors interacted in the emergence of the global jihadist movement.

Many question the role of ideology or, to express it better, which Islamic elements are effective in making some believers more prone to violent extremism. Some equate theology and ideology; therefore they blame Islamic theology itself or its certain teachings. For more learned observers, on the other hand, it is particularly Salafism – or its jihadist branch (al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya) – that is responsible.2 Salafism, they observe, is playing an integrating role between the contextual (both structural problems and those of human agency) and textual causes. The Salafist claim of complete and utter certainty accompanied by a simplistic and highly polarising outlook often appeals to those vulnerable, depressed and perplexed believers.

**Sunni Discourse on Violence**

Sunni discourse, exemplified by the foregoing organisations, does not categorically reject the use of violence. They indeed follow the traditional (Sunni) Islamic teaching that war is a human reality and violence is (and should be) employed when necessary but in a limited way to restore peace and reconciliation. The Sunni understanding hence promotes the idea of just war. With regard to military jihad, it therefore makes room for “defensive jihad” instead of “offensive jihad.” While the latter interprets the duty of military jihad as a personal and unconditional responsibility, the former holds that military action is a collective duty that is only authorised by a legitimate political organisation.3 The difference between the two marks the difference between the traditional Sunni doctrine of war and the contemporary jihadist doctrine of militancy. It also marks the difference between the “global jihadist” ideology introduced by al-Qaeda and the “classical jihadist” ideology embraced by leading Saudi militants who fought in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia and later in Iraq (Hegghammer, 2010). The Sunni critiques are well aware that the jihadist militants refer to certain teachings present in normative Islamic sources to justify terror. In response, they remind
one that each religious ruling should be considered with regard to its ratio legis (illa). That is to say: a ruling is concomitant with its underlying legal reasoning, they either both exist or disappear; therefore a past ruling cannot be randomly used (GPADHI, 2017: 2; al-Tayyib, 2014b: 10). The jihadists are hence viewed as those who have non-contextualised, narrow expertise on Qur’an and Sunna while usually lacking a sophisticated and broader scope of traditional religious knowledge and discursive flexibility (Spannaus, 2018: 93-94; Diyanet, 2015: 8). The latter is considered to be the prerogative of the Sunni ulama. Jihadist distortion is also attributed to their failure to understand maqasid al-shari’a (GPADHI, 2017; Diyanet, 2016; ’Abbadi, 2016a).

Counter-Arguments: Explaining Textual and Contextual Factors

Sunni critiques agree that militant jihadism is a complex phenomenon where both contextual and textual factors interact. Yet they differ in identifying their respective explanatory power. Shaykh al-Azhar calls the religious dimension “inhiraf al-fikriyya” or religious/conceptual deviation. He attributes this deviation to what he labels “the heritage of extremism and fanaticism in the Islamic thought” (al-Tayyib, 2014a). He associates this heritage with the early Kharjite movement and their excommunicatory (takfir) mentality, which plays a critical role in today’s jihadist misreading. However, this is not the real cause, in his view, of the violence witnessed in the region. Although this extremist heritage implies a “direct” religious cause, the reality is masked under this “religious cloak” (al-Tayyib, 2014b: 8). The political actors instrumentalise this deviation for the sake of their interests. On the one hand, the “disunity” among Arabs/Muslims ensuing from national, sectarian or jurisprudential differences provokes such a deviation: “Nothing proved detrimental to Muslims as the intellectual divisions and sectarian alignments resulting in inevitable polarisations and exclusions” (MCE Statements, 2017: 14). On the other hand, (pro-Israeli) Western powers often exploit the regional disunity and provoke religious extremist deviation to maintain their geostrategic gains (al-Tayyib, 2015a). In a public speech in the wake of the Paris attacks in November 2015, al-Tayyib (2015b: 55) asserted “terrorism is an intellectual and psychological disease which uses religion as a front. It has no link to authentic Islam.” Its causes are often linked to “social, economic and political doctrines,” or “biased double standards policies and the greed of international and national interests as well as arms race and market.”
The Azhar leadership tends to explain Islamic violent extremism with the assumption that the political and sectarian polarisation in the Middle East opens space for the resurgence and reshaping of the heritage of religious extremism and militancy, which in turn makes it more amenable to foreign manipulation. Most of Azhar’s scholarly energy is, accordingly, allotted to challenging the distortions and misconceptions brought about by this religious deviation and to curing the disunity among Muslims. The emphasis is hence on promoting “sahih al-din wa wasatiyyatuhu” or correct/authentic teachings of religion and its principle of moderation (Azhar website).

Diyanet similarly draws parallels between Kharijites and today’s jihadism. However, it sharply describes the latter as a “brand new phenomenon” that is “nominally Salafist, actually nihilist” (Diyanet, 2015: 12; 2016: 21). As a “domestic” contextual factor, Diyanet notes that the rise of extremist ideas among Muslims corresponds to a “search for authenticity” which results from their “inability to properly relate faith with lived reality and renew and update the relation in between” (Diyanet, 2015: 11). Its next report on IS, however, puts far more emphasis on “foreign” contextual factors. This might be due to the political context where conspiracy theories became a prominent feature of political discourse, especially after the coup attempt in July 2016. Diyanet (2016) rejects the idea that organisations like IS “in any way stem from Islam’s own dynamics,” arguing that such an idea puts Muslims in a “defensive mood” which creates more obstacles than solutions. They are rather the product of “modern political, economic, and social injustices, international power struggles, and ensuing conditions” or of “alienation”, “marginalisation” and “discrimination” felt or experienced by Muslims in the West and the “failure of [European] integration policies”. The extremist/terrorist organisations “exploit Islamic values for their own political and ideological agenda” and their religious distortions are to be viewed “not as a cause but an effect and manifestation” (Diyanet, 2016: 2-4). Nevertheless, Diyanet, like Azhar, extensively addresses and challenges numerous Islamic concepts and teachings employed by jihadist propaganda. This aims, it explains, “to expose how they exploit Islamic values” and to reveal the two basic epistemological problems it identifies with jihadist militancy: “usulsüzlik” as mentioned above, and “instrumentalising religion” (Diyanet, 2015: 8). Foreign contextual factors are hence dominantly emphasised over textual ones in Diyanet’s discourse.

RMU equally addresses both types of factors. Its explanations are yet less contentious and more balanced with regard to “domestic” and “foreign” (Western)
elements. It should, however, be noted that the Moroccan public documents and statements often point to Wahhabism and Shi‘ism as “foreign” elements without explicitly naming a country. These two currents are usually discredited as threats to “Moroccan Islam” which defines Moroccan exceptionalism vis-à-vis other Arab/Muslim countries, as will be discussed later.

In explaining contextual factors, Ahmad ‘Abbadi, the secretary-general of RMU, identifies “four dreams” that IS tried to realise and “ten grievances” it exploited. In his analysis (‘Abbadi, 2016a, 2016b), jihadists aspire to realising four dreams to cure four modern failures. First, with the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate many Muslims felt themselves to be “orphans” and the subsequent Arab regimes failed to unite Muslims. This gave rise to a “dream of unity” under the banner of a caliph. Second, the Saudi-Wahhabi resurgence emerged in order to purify Islam, yet the promise failed because Saudi Arabia collaborated with the “enemy” for political gains in the region. Thus the “dream of purity” is yet to be achieved. Third, corruption and bad governance in most Arab societies failed to offer a decent life for their citizens, hence a “dream of dignity”. Finally, IS aspires to realise an apocalyptical “dream of salvation” whose alternative is simply eternal damnation.

Likewise, ten grievances lie at the heart of the message and appeal of IS for ‘Abbadi: 1) conspiracy theories still blame the Western powers for the turmoil in the region; 2) colonialism went away, but without reconciliation or damage repair; 3) the Israeli-Palestine conflict is still unresolved; 4) Muslims face double standards in international affairs; 5) Arab/Muslim governments are either unresponsive or ineffective to address the humiliation that believers undergo in international media and the entertainment industry; 6) the Muslim world is in conflict all around; it is like a “Molotov cocktail”; 7) Iran’s influence is expanding at the expense of the Sunni world and Syria is in catastrophe; 8) the West has infiltrated the traditional value system and hence corrupted the true Islamic values; 9) Eurocentric readings falsify history and geography, thus ignoring Muslim contributions; 10) defamation of the Prophet and the Qur’an still remains (‘Abbadi, 2016a, 2016b).

This analysis shows that for RMU IS’s emergence and attraction are mainly an outcome of foreign and domestic political, ideological and geopolitical factors. This contextual approach is well reflected in its analyses of textual factors. RMU scholars identified more than 20 concepts which, they believe, are distorted by IS. They are principally those related to such Islamic concepts as sovereignty, governance, state, community, taxation, war and killing. It is worth mentioning
here that a particular concern of RMU is to demonstrate that IS is neither Islamic nor a state. This explains why RMU focuses more on concepts that are about Islamic political theology, so to speak. The concepts, on the other hand, include more theological ones such as faith, unbelief and religion (‘Abbadi, 2016c). They are yet explained in the framework of contextual factors mentioned above. RMU’s Unit of Dismantling Extremist Discourse launched the aforementioned book series in order to give a more contextualised understanding of these concepts. Through this series, RMU aims to provide scholarly argumentative tools to expose the jihadist narrative.

In disclosing jihadist textual misinterpretations, RMU chiefly employs the maqasid al-shari‘a approach. This has a particular significance in the Moroccan context. In pre-modern Islamic thought, the idea of maqasid al-shari‘a was derived from the jurisprudential principles of istislah (seeking the good) or maslaha (seeking public good), which were initially introduced by the Maliki school of jurisprudence. This particular school has been, and is still, the official school of thought in Morocco. Therefore, the accusation that jihadists fail to consider the objectives of divine legislation is far more stressed in RMU’s counter-theology.

When compared to other three, NU takes a quite different track in explaining textual and contextual justifications. Despite the fact that it recognises the role of “mass poverty” and “injustice” it asserts that the problem is much more exacerbated by textual factors. Following its International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders in 2016, NU issued a declaration (NUD, 2016) which identified “specific modes of interpreting Islam” as “the most significant factor causing the spread of religious extremism among Muslims” (4). NU openly blames “Middle Eastern countries” whose “supremacist” and “ultraconservative” teachings promote these specific modes. Saudi Arabia is at the top of the list. It even labels IS people as “Wahhabs” and its fighters as the “Wahhabi army” (Rahmat Islam Nusantara, 2016). Besides S. Arabia, Iran and Qatar are also held responsible. For NU, all three seek “political legitimacy” for their regional supremacy and “weaponise sectarian differences” to this end (NUD, 2016: 4). In 2017, this time Gerakan Pemuda Ansor (GP Ansor), the youth branch of NU, convened a conference in which NU ulama elaborated more on the textual factors. The meeting adopted the GP Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam which provocatively suggested “it is false and counterproductive to claim that the actions of al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram and other such groups have nothing to do with Islam, or merely represent a perversion of Islamic teachings.” They rather represent “obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law, which are premised
upon perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam” (GPADHI, 2017: 10). In their analysis, these tenets resulted from the Middle Eastern historical context of conflicts for power in the formative period of Islam. This has in time produced a worldview where “religious supremacy,” “hatred,” and “political domination” prevailed. In order to cure the “rapidly metastasising crisis,” the declaration suggests Muslims reconciling the “problematic” Islamic teachings with the “ever-changing circumstances of time and place.” The conditions, it reasons, where “orthodox Islam” and “contemporary civilization” emerged “differ significantly” (GPADHI, 2017: 3-6). NU, thus, calls for a comprehensive strategy to develop “an alternative Islamic new orthodoxy” through “re-contextualising the [traditional] Islamic teachings” that “authorise and explicitly enjoin such violence” (GPADHI, 2017: 5). Yahya Cholil Staquf, NU’s secretary-general, who is the key figure behind the institution’s recent push for new orthodoxy, markedly affirmed in an interview to a German newspaper (Staquf, 2017) that “there is a clear relationship between fundamentalism, terror and the basic assumptions of Islamic orthodoxy. So long as we lack consensus regarding this matter, we cannot attain final victory over fundamentalist violence within Islam.” In his view, there are particularly “three centres of concern” with regard to “traditional Islam,” all related with Muslim demands about political governance, legislation and social interaction. He asserts “the [IS]’s goal of establishing the global caliphate stands squarely within the orthodox Islamic tradition” although the idea is no more realistic today. Muslims will keep clashing with contemporary politics, he thinks, as long as “the traditional norms of Islamic jurisprudence” are assumed to be “immutable” and “absolute” (Staquf, 2017). He also urges the West “not to force Muslims to adopt a moderate interpretation of Islam. But Western politicians should stop telling us that fundamentalism and violence have nothing to do with traditional Islam” (Staquf, 2017). Given that “[NU]’s battlefields are as much at home as they are in the larger Muslim world,” whether these calls reflect a consensus within the institution and what long-term affects they would bring are yet to be seen (Dorsey, 2018).

Different Interests, Different Counter-Theologies

The synoptic analysis above illustrates that the four organisations address both textual and contextual factors in explaining the ascendancy of militant jihadism. They, however, differ in expounding how they interact with each. This difference
is due to their distinct national and institutional contexts. Their respective counter-religious strategies, accordingly, converge and diverge.

In explaining contemporary jihadism, Azhar regards foreign political contextual elements as more decisive than textual ones. Yet, its counter-strategy is chiefly based upon rectifying extremist “misreading” and “misinterpretation” of the texts. Azhar has a clear institutional motivation for such a choice. It has recently been the target of harsh critiques from various social and political actors, including the secular, liberal and some Christian groups as well as the Egyptian president. It is stated to be ineffective in meeting the religious extremist challenge due to its inability to renew its religious discourse and to modernise its clumsy and out-dated curriculum, which some claim, includes extremist teachings on such issues as blasphemy, slavery and apostasy. Ibrahim Eissa, a prominent journalist and writer, even contends that the institution indeed provides “an environment that is conducive to extremism” (cited in ‘Azzam, 2015). As a response, Azhar officials insist that such accusations downplay the role the institution has been playing in promoting authentic and moderate Islam. A spokesperson responded that Azhar’s curriculum has been in effect for centuries whereas terrorism emerged recently and most terrorists were trained in non-Azhar institutions (cited in El Kholy, 2015). Moreover, as the most established Sunni academic organisation, Azhar views itself as “the highest scholarly authority for all Muslims... protecting [them] against deviated and extremist ideologies” (Azhar Brochure, 2017: 35). Its counter-strategy accordingly prioritises conceptual reclamation to restore true Islam. Such a strategy could vindicate Azhar’s claim to be the internationally leading scholarly Sunni platform that functions as “the impregnable fortress working to spread the true religion and moderation” (Azhar website). To put it differently, Azhar’s counter-theology is designed to represent its institutional exceptionalism.

Like Azhar’s, RMU’s counter-theology rests upon conceptual reclamation. However, unlike Azhar’s, it tends to interpret the textual factors in the light of contextual ones; hence it focuses more on a certain kind of textual distortion. Again unlike Azhar’s wasatiyya, its religious orientation has a dominant theological motif, namely maqasid al-sari’a. Azhar’s wasatiyya embraces various (Sunni) interpretations and subsequently employs different theological tools to substantiate its reclamation strategy. This indeed functions as a means to keep its autonomy vis-à-vis other religious actors and the state in Egypt. While enjoying royal support, RMU, on the other hand, sticks to the “teleological” approach to promote Moroccan exceptionalism. Its counter-theology is hence particularly
framed by *maqasid*. We should also note that more emphasis on “foreign” Middle Eastern currents (i.e. Wahhabism and Shi’ism) rather than on Western political actors in pointing out contextual factors highlights the exceptional character of Moroccan Islam.

We see a similar approach in Indonesia’s NU. Unlike many other Sunni criticisms, the inner dynamics of the Middle Eastern power struggle is much more emphasised in NU statements. But, unlike with RMU, not just today’s Middle East but also its historical context is equally, even more, responsible for the textual distortions feeding jihadist narratives. In NU’s analyses, hence, the textual and contextual factors appear as mutually conditioning, both today and in the past; yet the focus is more on the textual factors, unlike the other three. NU’s difference can be attributed to the motivation to single out the Indonesian exceptionalism as a non-Arab and non-Middle Eastern Muslim-majority society which is believed to have successfully developed a plural, tolerant and inculcated Islam in the archipelago. NU’s strategy thus differs substantially from the others. The problem, for NU, is not the Islamic concepts misread and abused today by the militants. It is instead yesterday’s “problematic” and “obsolete” teachings (of the Middle East) that pave the way to jihadist distortion. Accordingly, rather than rectifying the misinterpreted concepts, NU proposes a wide-ranging and more ambitious theological strategy. NU thus appears to develop an “alternative” rather than a “counter” theology. In so doing, its leading theological motif is *rahma* or divine grace/mercy. Despite mentioning *maqasid al-shari’a* (GPADHI, 2017: 3, 20), NU holds that *rahma* is the “primary message of Islam” and “the source of universal love and compassion.” Referring to Qur’an 21:107, they suggest that even the Prophet Muhammad was sent exclusively to achieve *rahma* on earth. They say that the “true purpose of Islam” is “to promote the spiritual and material well-being of humanity” as well as “to establish social harmony and justice” (GPADHI, 2017; NUD, 2016). For NU, the nature of today’s jihadist textual distortion is hence not conceptual. It is a distortion about the very purpose of religion.

In approaching textual and contextual factors, Diyanet stands in the opposite pole to NU. It exclusively blames the contextual factors and sees textual distortions simply as a result. In explaining jihadism, the emphasis is significantly on Western powers, their colonial struggles or their failures to include/integrate Muslims in Europe. It even claims that we would most probably be witnessing Hindu or Confucian justifications of violence if people in China or India experienced the same socio-political conditions that people now have in the
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Middle East (Diyanet, 2016: 3). The solution, it infers, must be first and foremost political instead of religious. Notwithstanding, like Azhar and RMU, Diyanet lists several Islamic concepts and teachings that are, it thinks, exploited by the jihadists in responding to conditions they face. The emphasis in addressing them is yet more to expose the jihadists’ “lack of methodological expertise”, “eclectic pragmatism” and “instrumentalisation” rather than a conceptual reclamation (Diyanet, 2015; 2016). An explanation of why Diyanet allots considerable effort to correcting these distortions although it sees them essentially as an outcome of international political factors could be to highlight the peculiarity of the religious interpretation that Diyanet follows. As Turkey has Ottoman heritage as the last Muslim empire, Diyanet sees itself as the heir apparent of the Ottoman religious legacy and authority. It thus favours Turkish exceptionalism. In implying this exceptionalism, however, it resembles Azhar rather than RMU. Although Turkish Islam, like Moroccan Islam, represents a particular combination of Sunni elements, the tone and language Diyanet employs against IS’s exploitation is akin to that of Azhar. Diyanet’s increasing competition with Azhar to claim Sunni authority may explain this convergence. In line with the Turkish government’s political ambitions, the last decade witnessed an unprecedented increase in Diyanet’s visibility and outreach among Muslim societies and at several international Muslim platforms.

Despite such differences, they all agree, to differing extents, that the jihadist phenomenon has a theological aspect. A common strategy is thus to reveal their theological failures. These failures, they similarly identify, arise from their lack of comprehensive religious knowledge and lack of expertise in jurisprudential methodology. They argue that this paves the way to literalist, non-contextualised, exclusivist, selective and pragmatic readings that disregard the goals of divine message and teachings. As a solution, all, in a similar fashion, advocate for a balanced handling of three classical Islamic disciplines, namely fiqh (jurisprudence), kalam (doctrine) and tasawwuf (spirituality). Such a combination, they hold, is lacking in narrow textual expertise of Salafist/jihadist methodology. Yet their combinations differ. It is officially Maliki-Ash’arite-Sufism of al-Junayd in the Moroccan case, whereas it is practically Hanafi-Maturidite-Sufism of Ibn Arabi/Rumi in the Turkish case. NU and Azhar, on the other hand, both claim to harbour all four Sunni madhabib, two schools of Sunni doctrine and their respective branches of mainstream Sufism. Azhar, furthermore, gives space to Salafist and Islamist textual hermeneutics as well as sometimes entering into dialogue with Shi’ite authorities. This openness, they claim, reflects their
wasatiyya or centrist approach, which forms Azhar’s distinctive feature and is the basis of its global appeal as well as its main religious orientation against jihadist extremism (Bano, 2015).

It is clear that these various combinations represent diversity and vibrancy within the Sunni tradition. These institutions aim to take advantage of resting upon an established tradition to defeat contemporary challenges. Nevertheless, this often makes them more vulnerable. On the one hand, their specific understandings of Sunni tradition compete with each other in terms of authority and influence. The Salafi view, instead, pushes for a global, transnational, pure, certain and authentic Islam. The latter attracts more in time of crises and uncertainty. On the other hand, the Salafi methodology often appears more attractive because it offers a practical and simple hermeneutics whereby one’s dependence on a religious authority is kept limited. Unlike demanding traditional Sunni scholarship, it gives the believer the chance of direct and freer engagement with the normative sources. In explaining the global influence of Saudi Salafism, Masooda Bano observes that along with generous Saudi sponsorship and the credibility it entertains as it emanates from the birthplace of Islam, a third factor is also crucial. It is this last point that many Sunni organisations miss about Salafist methodology: Salafist methodology “gives the individual greater autonomy” in religious issues by “arguing for a direct engagement with the foundational texts” and by “minimising reliance on the weighty cannon” of Sunni commentaries. (Bano, 2018a: 12) The Sunni tradition does not historically have a central body and various Sunni institutions significantly lost ground in the colonial and post-colonial periods. Moreover, the increasing globalisation, digitalisation and popular literacy have fractured their authority in contemporary times. The Salafists are filling this vacuum through their emphasis on authenticity and simplicity. Therefore, a counter theological strategy that heavily accentuates the advantages of having an established tradition will be less likely to be a winning strategy in fighting against militant jihadism.

An Evolving Counter-Theology?

The tone of Muslim critiques and responses to jihadists is often argumentative and apologetic. This is also true for the four cases examined here. This is understandable given that a great concern and motivation is to restore the image of Islam via exposing and correcting theological distortions. A noteworthy
aspect is, however, that they sometimes refer to modern ideas and concepts in their counter-arguments and efforts. One can observe a tendency where they engage with modern/Western discourse and cover such issues as human rights, citizenship, minority rights, justice, democratic state, women rights, freedom, etc.

In June 2011, as an immediate response to the changing political landscape following the Arab uprisings, Azhar, for instance, issued a document on the future of Egypt. The document stated that Egypt should be a “modern” and “democratic” state based on a constitution that ensures full separation of powers and that guarantees equality for all citizens. It mentioned human rights to be supported and called for respecting freedom of thought; hence demanded the institutional independence of Azhar. Nathan J. Brown (2011: 13) argues that the document “represents not only a laudable search for common ground [between conservative and liberal groups] but also a measure of a political bargain” whereby Azhar’s “endorsement of liberal principles” is balanced with “a clear statement of support for its own independence.” Although Azhar failed to assert the principles stated here in the later period of al-Sisi, it is worth mentioning that it showed its proclivity, even will, to make room for modern and liberal political discourse. More recently, in March 2017 Azhar convened a multi-faith international conference on “Freedom and Citizenship: Diversity and Integration.” The conference particularly aimed to discuss citizenship in various aspects and followed by a declaration. The declaration mentions the Prophet’s Charter of Madina as an Islamic basis of the idea of citizenship. But reflecting the contemporary Zeitgeist, it also “reaffirm[s] the importance of equality between Muslims and Christians in terms of rights and responsibilities defined by the state. Indeed, both Muslims and Christians are considered one nation” (Azhar Conference, 2017: 10).

In a similar fashion, the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration, which came as a direct response to IS’s abuse and massacre of non-Muslim minorities, called ulama to develop a jurisprudence of the concept of citizenship compatible with Islamic principles embodied in the Medina Charter. Hosted by the Moroccan king, the declaration highlighted that the objectives of this charter provide a suitable framework for constitutionally including modern international norms enshrined in the United Nations documents, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. RMU’s secretary-general ‘Abbadi likewise talks about the importance of human rights, socio-economic development, the need to make the state accountable to its citizens in order effectively to face religious extremism
Moreover, in corollary with its mission, RMU interprets principles of *maqasid* in a broader and progressive manner (‘Abbadi, 2016a; 2016b; al-Idrisi, 2016) to provide religious legitimacy to the governmental reform agenda in political, social and economic areas. NU, on the other hand, in 2017 convened the Global Unity Forum (GUF) with the participation of the representatives of various non-Muslim groups. The Forum stated that religions are supposed to “contribute to civilisation” not to “destroy” and “interfaith cooperation is needed to realise global peace” (GUF, 2017). In the Forum, NU also underlined that its proposed alternative theology should include non-Muslim contributions as well.

We can detect a similar tendency in Diyanet’s statements. Although it does not explicitly refer to any international declaration or statement on human rights and freedoms, a liberal universal spirit is discernable. It, for instance, urges religious scholars “to accurately present Islam’s view on ‘human’ regardless of their religion, language, and ethnicity” (Diyanet, 2016: 43). It affirms (Diyanet, 2015: 26) “Islam projects and promotes diversity.” Diyanet, likewise, criticises the attitude that “prioritises only the rights of belief of those who are in the majority or who belong to one’s own group.” It warns that “the moral attitude should rather value and observe the right of belief for anyone and the right to practise their belief no matter that they constitute a small or big community” (Diyanet, 2015: 39).

These examples illustrate that Sunni counter-theology cannot be characterised only by an argumentative or dialectical approach when responding to militant jihadism. They rather show a tendency where it can engage with modern and/or liberal discourse on human rights, citizenship, diversity, democratic state and social justice. As a matter of fact, the insistence on contextual and purposive analysis of normative religious sources can be taken as a step forward for more engagement. Yasin Arnold Mol (2016) supports this observation. In his analyses of recent (English) fatwas denouncing terrorism, he explores:

One of the interesting aspects of these counter responses against extremism is that they show how mainstream Sunni Islam, partially as a response to extremism, has incorporated modernist and reformist thought on reinterpretation of the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition, and on human rights, liberal governance, and religious pluralism ... The globalisation of Islamic radicalism has forced mainstream Sunni Islam to globalise not only its discourse, but also its content (56-57).
We already have several progressive Muslim scholars and activists who call for more intellectual and hermeneutical engagement with modern or post-modern thought in facing puritanist Islamic hegemonic discourse (e.g. Duderija, 2017; Abou El Fadl, 2005; Moosa, 2005). The mainstream Sunni discourse has not yet responded to this call in a clear positive way. However, considering the tendency exemplified above, we can predict that it is more likely to interact in future with progressive and liberal Muslim discourse in responding to militant jihadism. Before that, another big challenge is yet to be met, however. The Sunni authorities seem to fall in a moral crisis in the upcoming period as their discourse and actions are becoming more associated with the “official Islam” of their respective countries where the political authority applies decisive pressure to design a particular version of acceptable Islam in order to counter terrorism.

“Official Islam” and Sunni Religious Authorities

Robbins and Rubin (2017) observe that as a response to “the new challenges in the regional environment following the Arab uprisings,” four Arab countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Morocco) opted to enhance the “official Islam” model where the religious space is controlled through allocating financial resources, political capital, and institutional power to elements of official Islam. Brown’s analysis of “official Islam” in Egypt, Morocco, Oman and Lebanon brings similar conclusions (Brown, 2017). This is already valid for Turkey and Indonesia, even long before the “war on terror.” Following their analyses as well as considering the Turkish and Indonesian examples, we can make the following observations: the official Islam model is essentially designed to promote state-sponsored and -controlled religious establishment in order to limit the impact and outreach of alternative and/or popular Islamist movements that may challenge the political establishment and to prevent the spread of religious extremism. Despite county-specific differences, practically speaking, the following initiatives are commonly observed while building “official Islam”: the promotion of a particular religious identity attributed to the distinctive feature of Islamic understanding and practice in a given country and which often overlaps with national identity, bureaucratisation of religious institutions and actors, stricter observance of mosques and preachers, more control on or centralisation of fatwa bodies, attempts to standardise Friday sermons, providing modernised training to imams and other religious functionaries with proper acceptable doctrinal training.
Another common tendency is to advertise its own brand of official Islam abroad as best practice or an effective antidote to religious extremism, and accordingly to give more international visibility to the official religious establishment in question.

For their four cases, Robbins and Rubin (2017) note that although each recognises the clear value of official Islam controlling the religious space, their ability to do so depends on two factors: the country’s inherited religious institutions and the country’s regime type. Although not elaborated in their study, Turkey represents perhaps the most successful case of official Islam. In Turkey, religious and national identities are indispensably interconnected, and through Diyanet the state plays an unparalleled role in the religious field. Beginning with the introduction of the so-called “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis” in the aftermath of a coup d’état in 1980, Turkish “official Islam” has gradually gained importance (Eligür, 2010). Diyanet, as the religious state apparatus of Turkish Islam, today controls both the administration of mosques and imams as well as issuing fatwas which are operated separately in our other three cases. Similarly, Diyanet exerts certain influence on imam training programmes that are separately provided by the vocational imam-hatip high schools or universities’ theology faculties. Being one of the biggest state-funded religious bureaucracies in the Islamic world, Diyanet’s planned budget for 2019 exceeds that of several ministries including energy, transport, urban development, science and technology (BÜMKO, 2019). Since 2002, Diyanet has been enjoying generous political, financial and moral support by the Turkish governments under the AK Parti rule. Thanks to this support and despite it having lacked traditional authority in the eyes of both devout Muslims at home and the wider Sunni community abroad, Diyanet is recently taking centre stage as a leading Islamic scholarly platform, and perhaps potentially a globally influential leadership of Sunni Islam (Bano, 2018b). Diyanet has also expanded its base and reach abroad, particularly in Europe which hosts the largest Turkish diaspora (e.g. see Öktem, 2012; Öztürk, 2016, Öztürk and Sözeri, 2018).

Morocco seems to have emulated the Turkish example of official Islam. Following the 2003 Casablanca bombings, the royal establishment initiated sweeping reforms in the governing religious field to counter religious terrorism. Previous kings had opted to govern the religious sphere with a strategy of diversifying and co-opting non-state religious actors. King Muhammad VI, instead, implemented a strategy of developing more extensive religious institutions (Bruce, 2015: 183). This has led to a highly bureaucratised
management of Islam in Morocco (Wainscott, 2017), very similar to what we are witnessing in Turkey. Nevertheless, rather than administering the religious field through a single institution, Morocco established or reorganised different institutions which operate under the king’s leadership and coordination. RMU was indeed an outcome of these reforms. A critical point in these efforts was to promote “Moroccan Islam” as a particular national religious identity based on the specific elements of Sunni Islam that have been adopted in the long history of the country. Moroccan Islam provides an “optimum” combination of four elements embedded in Moroccan religious life: the Maliki school of jurisprudence, Ash’ari school of doctrine, certain branches of sober Sufism and the central role of the king as the “amir al-mu’minin” or Commander of the Faithful who embodies the other three elements (Honerkamp and Calabria, 2013). As such, it also represents an exceptional national-religious identity vis-à-vis other Arab/Muslim societies. RMU is assigned to intellectually support this objective. It functions as the leading scholarly platform within the reformed Moroccan religious bureaucracy and the “centrepiece of the monarchy’s reforms to the religious field” (Wainscott, 2017: 48). It also advertises Morocco’s official Islam abroad.

In Indonesia, official Islam is represented by two leading yet competing organisations, NU and Muhammadiyah. Thanks to their respective highly complex structures, the two organisations have long dominated the religious, social and political life in Indonesia and have reached “a degree of societal penetration that is unparalleled in the Muslim world” (Van Bruinessen, 2013: 21). NU is yet the bigger religious partner of Indonesian official Islam. In 2015, as a part of its fight against rising militant Islamism, NU introduced the idea of Islam Nusantara, or Islam of the East Indies. The idea contrasts Indonesia’s Islamic experience with that of the Middle East. It emphasises that Indonesian Muslims have followed a different track in embracing Islam in the pre-modern period and embracing in the modern era the Pancasila (Staquf, 2015; 2018; Taylor, 2018). The Pancasila is the founding “Five Principles” that define modern Indonesia as a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, secular and constitutional nation-state. NU sees itself as a natural outcome of the former and a decisive actor that provided religious legitimacy for the latter. Through promoting Islam Nusantara both in Indonesia and abroad, NU tries to contradistinguish the Indonesian experience as an exceptional “local/national” alternative to the “transnational” and “purified” Islam, currently dominated by Arab Salafism. The concept is now widely circulating and many political leaders, including the president Widodo himself, give support to the idea. It must also be noted that the president appointed Yahya
C. Staquf, the secretary-general of NU, to the prestigious Presidential Advisory Council in May 2018. This exemplifies the cooperative relationship between NU and the Indonesian state, which characterises Indonesia’s official Islam.

In Egypt, we have a similar but more complex situation. It is not cooperation but mutual interdependence that defines the relationship between Azhar and the political authority. Nasser’s nationalisation reforms in the early 1960s were decisive for Azhar and the Egyptian religious sphere. These reforms put Azhar under the direct control of the Egyptian state. Its political and organisational autonomy was extensively challenged. Nasser and the succeeding presidents have consistently pursued coopting Azhar to justify their policies and political priorities, especially against the Muslim Brothers (MB). In facing the militant Islamist challenge, the political elite fears that undermining or ignoring Azhar’s contribution may provide more space and attraction to extremists. While trying to keep its religious and intellectual autonomy, Azhar, on the other hand, pursues a policy that avoids a serious clash. It keeps benefiting state support to further its penetration and authority although this requires compromises in return. The institution, simultaneously, resists political demands that would, otherwise, give the image of total absorption. Therefore, in the case of Egyptian official Islam, the religious and political partners are often guarded and cautious, if not suspicious, of each other. The tension between the two has recently been becoming more apparent (El Taki, 2017, Meital, 2017) as the autocratic rule of al-Sisi presses for a substantial change in religious discourse and curricula to more effectively counter jihadist extremism, which jeopardises the already fragile social coexistence and national unity.

Some link the rise of contemporary appeal to Salafi methodology and the jihadist interpretations to the inability of traditional Sunni authorities whose nature and roles were remarkably altered by colonial and post-colonial policies. The official Islam model can be seen as an attempt to re-empower these authorities. Nevertheless, this empowerment comes with a notable cost. The religious establishments are now under more surveillance from the state and have few options but to cooperate with them. This in turn brings a credibility question which risks, in the long run, the effectiveness of their religious message. This will have implications for the relevance and ability of the “organised religion” in the Sunni world and it would affect the fight against religious extremism.

Zeghal (2007) explains the popularity and credibility of Azhar with its traditional role of being a “buffer zone between radical and/or political Islam on the one hand and state-defined Islam on the other.” Bano (2018c), however,
argues that this was seriously challenged in the post-Arab Spring period mainly due to the explicit support that Azhar leaders gave to al-Sisi’s iron-fist rule. This was not the first time that Azhar backed controversial governmental policies. Nevertheless, “the intensity of violence associated with the al-Sisi regime makes [Azhar’s] defence of state atrocities more questionable than in the past” and “some prominent Azhar scholars (former as well as current) have condemned the Brotherhood with such ferocity that they have severely compromised their moral authority” (Bano, 2018c: 58). Therefore, Azhar today witnesses an unprecedented moral and legitimacy crisis both inside and outside Egypt. Furthermore, Azhar is under continuous attack by the growing secular and liberal groups who question the institution’s domineering initiatives with a religious agenda thanks to the governmental support it enjoys in the name of fight against religious extremism. The future ramifications of the competition in Egypt for the religious field and its implications for Islamist extremism are yet to be seen.

Turkish Diyanet is going through a similar credibility crisis although it is pointed to as a pretty effective case for official Islam. Diyanet is in fact a newcomer to the global Sunni agenda and asserts itself as the leading authority of moderate Sunni Islam. Turkey’s democratisation and economic boom since 2002 that undermined the Kemalist bureaucratic and military tutelage was critical in Diyanet’s ascendancy. Notwithstanding, Turkey has been witnessing a serious democratic and economic backlash for the last few years. Especially after the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the regime in Turkey turned into an authoritarian rule with a huge crackdown on dissidents and civil society that has never been witnessed in modern Turkish history. Furthermore, corruption has become so widespread and the pace of economic development slowed down sharply. Diyanet’s unconditional support to many controversial and oppressive governmental policies and their justification on religious grounds as well as its total silence on corruption claims that also implicate senior Diyanet officials bring its credibility into question. Furthermore, its disregard of child abuse scandals because they happened in some religious boarding schools aroused suspicion about its credibility. Along with secular and liberal critiques similar to those in Egypt, some devout Muslims have also become critical of such condoning. A notable reaction to such failures of official Islam in Turkey is the recent rise of deism among young people. At several occasions, meetings and statements, Diyanet expresses concerns about increasing deist tendencies in society. It is possible that in future Diyanet may be losing its appeal and power of persuasion although it keeps reaching out to all walks of society. Relatively speaking, Islamic
militancy has never been a key threat in modern Turkey. Nevertheless, the sharp political and social polarisation in the country and the discursive justification of violence on many accounts in recent years increase concerns about a possible rise of militancy. Furthermore, many already are suspicious about the Syrian policy comprising some sort of cooperation with certain jihadist groups against the Syrian regime and lack of cohesive and long-term integration policies about more than three million Syrian refugees in the country. Whether they will make Turkey more vulnerable to extremist violence is not clear. How the eroding religious credibility of Diyanet will affect the appeal of extremists in this context is yet to be seen.

NU does not have such an intense moral or credibility crisis. It still largely holds its appeal. However, the political discourse has recently become more conservative and intolerant in Indonesia. In the liberal post-Suharto era, Islamic activism has both increased and diversified and religious activism has been marked by the rise of not only political Islamists but also various Salafi groups, including the militant ones. It is no coincidence that Indonesia has witnessed several deadly jihadist attacks in recent years. Security authorities fear that Indonesia would be a future breeding ground for Islamist militancy in South Asia (see, e.g., Lloyd and Dredge 2014). Likewise, Martin van Bruinessen, a leading Dutch expert on Indonesia, observes (2013) a “conservative turn” in the country that resulted from the “Arabisation” trends among Indonesian Muslims. The religious and political attraction of “transnational Islamic puritanism” threatens the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of Indonesian society. It in turn “undermines the established nation-wide Muslim organisations (Muhammadiyah and NU) that had been providing religious guidance for most of the 20th century” (Van Bruinessen, 2018: ii). In late 2016 in Jakarta, huge public demonstrations were held under the banner of “Islam Defence Action” (Aksi Bela Islam). These were the largest mass Muslim mobilisations in Indonesia’s modern history. Although they were organised by various fundamentalist and conservative factions the majority of the participants belonged to the mainstream and non-violent Muslim body (see Herdiansahi et al., 2017 more on these demonstrations). Although NU officially discredited these demonstrations and even organised a counter one in cooperation with non-Muslim organisations, they already signalled that NU is at least losing ground. The recent diversification of the religious sphere in Indonesia seems to provoke more competition about religious authority. Moreover, the emphasis of Salafi groups on simplicity, authenticity, universality and purity directly challenge NU’s religious rhetoric on inculturation and the exceptional
local character of Indonesian Islam. In future, we will be observing more theological clashes between the two visions of Islam in Indonesia. Furthermore, the conservative and Salafi groups will most probably harshly react to NU’s recent proposal to re-contextualise previous Islamic teachings.

It is difficult to foresee whether we see similar authority or credibility crises in Morocco. Morocco is the youngest among the other three in terms of adopting a clear “official Islam” model. The bureaucratisation of the Moroccan religious field bears fruit only recently. Its fate is yet to be seen. Assessing our four cases, it would be possible to make the following observation with regard to official Islam and militant jihadism. The credibility question that is more likely to arise in various official Islam models where religious establishments are urged to cooperate or negotiate with political authority would trigger more debate on organised religion, local Islam and religious education. This in turn would bring more questions about the nature and role of Sunni authorities and about their capacity of resilience against the Salafist claims.

Conclusion

Militant jihadism is more than a religious phenomenon but triggered heated debate and controversies on several Islamic teachings and practice both among Muslims and between Muslims and the wider world. In most cases, jihadist organisations have a Sunni provenance. Therefore, Sunni responses and counter-arguments have become of particular attention and significance. According to the synoptic analysis of the discourses of the four leading Sunni institutions carried out in this chapter, the following appear to be the common elements in their critiques: Jihadists have extensively impaired the image of Islam worldwide. Their violent strategy and actions inflict the most harm on Muslims. Islam does not justify terrorism even though defensive war could be justified on certain grounds. Jihadists promote a literal, simplistic, selective and excommunicatory approach. It essentially lacks a comprehensive and balanced treatment of intellectual, practical and spiritual aspects of Islamic teachings and praxis which has been the hallmark of Muslim orthodoxy. They are religiously heretic groups, and their heresy is often manipulated in line with political, sectarian and economic interests.

The counter-theologies of these four institutions differ due to their differences in explaining the emergence and appeal of militant jihadism. Although they all
show a general tendency that understands the jihadist phenomenon primarily as a result of the socio-political context in the Middle East, they have dissimilar views on what has really gone wrong with this context and how it has affected the jihadist textual distortion. Moreover, their explanations are usually framed by their varying interests ensuing from their distinct institutional and national contexts in which they operate. The counter-theology of each organisation is designed to reflect the “exceptional” character of its respective institutional and national context. Therefore, while they seem to converge in employing a similar counter-religious strategy, namely exposing and/or correcting the jihadist distortion, what is to be rectified and how it is implemented differs in each case.

Furthermore, their counter strategies reveal several challenges. An important one is about religious authority and authenticity. In the globalised world where religious knowledge is unprecedentedly popularised, the Salafist emphasis on more direct and individualised engagement with the foundational texts becomes more attractive and reachable. In addition, the Salafist claim on authenticity, purity and universality provides a stronger anchor for the believers who seek straightforward responses in an already perplexing world. The reactionary, revolutionary and venturesome jihadist propaganda surely takes advantage of this Salafist worldview. In response, Sunni authorities dialectically defend their religious authority and authenticity with reference to their expertise in complex, accumulated and pretty technical traditional canons. They base their legitimacy upon this established tradition, which is at the very target of the Salafist/jihadist struggle. Therefore, the dialectical Sunni counter-theologies aiming at undoing jihadist “distortion” with reference to authenticity and authority is less likely to be an affective strategy to face militant jihadism in the long run. The theological fight should rather be given in a different field, namely challenging the Salafist/Jihadist claim on simplicity and certainty whereby direct and exclusive access to the divine truth is presupposed. To succeed in this latter fight, an effective way could be to demonstrate and centralise, in an Islamic framework, the diverse and complex nature of divine involvements with creation. This is perhaps the most viable option to challenge the exclusivist jihadist vision. Invoking the rich legacy of Islamic tradition may help in such an attempt. In this case, Sunni religious strategy is more likely to be successful only if it views tradition not as a warehouse of the established ideas or methods but as a repository for further creative hermeneutical engagements. This necessitates approaching the Islamic legacy not in a regressive and retrospective but a progressive and prospective way. This leads us to the suggestion that the theological advance against militant jihadism
rests paradoxically on more engagement with the progressive and liberal Muslim discourse rather than on the Salafist or conservative one. NU’s attempt to develop a new Islamic orthodoxy seems to be more promising as a counter-strategy to defy Islamic extremism, in this sense. Besides, the ability of Sunni authorities for discursive and methodological flexibility in adapting to social change can also be helpful in addressing the Salafist/jihadist claim on simplicity and certainty. That we see some indications of Islamic discourses evolving in dialogue with modern, reformist or liberal discourse, as illustrated above, is of particular importance. Whether and how Sunni authorities continue this engagement and whether and how they will be able to convince their followers in this enterprise will be critical for the fate of Sunni religious strategy over militant jihadism.

An arduous challenge waiting here is whether these institutions keep their moral authority within the limits of the trendy official Islam models of which they are compelled to be a part. On the one hand, the global fight against Islamic violent extremism has opened up new political space and legitimacy for the religious establishments both at home and abroad. On the other hand, it has provided political authorities more legitimacy to exert influence in the religious field. In a field where both religious and political authority claim legitimacy, the former is required to compromise if it decides not to totally submit to or clash with the latter. Depending on the type of political actors’ way of governing, this compromise may seriously risk religious credibility as exemplified in the case of Azhar and Diyanet. Despite often being depicted as an effective way to counter extremism, the official Islam model may be counter-productive in the long run, given the anti-establishment ethos of jihadist revolutionaries and their dexterity in translating individual or collective discontents into violent activism. Whether the Sunni authorities can retain their moral credibility will hence matter in effectively countering the jihadist challenge.

Notes
1 These books are available online in Arabic at http://www.arrabita.ma/Article.aspx?C=107195 [accessed 25 October 2018].
2 For contemporary Salafism see, among others, Meijer, 2009; Lauzière, 2016; Rougier, 2008 and Wiktorowicz, 2006.
3 For more on this distinction and Muslim conceptions of jihad and holy war from past to present see Cook, 2011; Bonner, 2006; Habeck, 2006; Gerges, 2005, Firestone, 2002.
4 For an evaluation of this document see Maged 2012.

For an evaluation of this document see Hayward, 2016.

References


