

Research Article



The Role of Sharia and Religious Leaders in Influencing Violent Radicalism

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Abstract | Religious leaders have become influential in many Muslim communities. This is despite these leaders having had less influence about 50 years ago, due to the encroaching of modernity backed by science. Science not only contests religious leaders' worldview, but it also offers a credible alternative. However, beginning in the 1970s, thanks to Saudi Arabia's backing, religious leaders began growing in power due to the popularization of a self-serving theme that sharia is all-encompassing divine law and an essential guide to life. A new analysis of the 2013 Pew data shows us that religious leaders' political and religious influences correlate with sharia's popularity, and in turn, can correlate with politically motivated violence. In particular, the top three terrorist groups in 2013 responsible for the most killings have had religious leaders in very senior positions. Calling the sharia bluff as a core part of a counterterrorism approach may be central to undermining the influence of religious leaders who espouse violence or undercut the value of modern education, and the ideology of radicals. Not least of all, this approach, as history suggests, has a good chance of reinvigorating modernity in affected Muslim communities.

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Introduction

Religious leaders are an influential part of most communities. This article aims to explain how the interplay between religious leaders and sharia came to influence violent radicalism by tracing Saudi Arabia's spread of the Wahhabi version of Islam and analyzing the 2013 Pew report on the world's Muslims. This report samples the Muslim public's outlook, among other things, on sharia and religious leaders in nations with Muslim populations of at least 10 million or more—other than Algeria, China, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (Bell et al. 2013). It makes sense to focus on the internal dynamics of the religion, because unlike other faiths, violence

conducted in the name of Islam not only transcends ethno-cultural, linguistic, geographic, and income boundaries, but is also far more prevalent.

Very few scholars have investigated the relationship between religious leaders and sharia on the one hand and the public's support for militant groups on the other. A recent survey of American mosques found a correlation between the extent of their sharia adherence and listing of texts that call for violence against non-Muslims (Kedar and Yerushalmi 2011). However, the authors' core conclusions are not readily scalable to the individual level and across geographical fault lines or how it relates to militant activism. Another recent study based upon a public survey conducted

in Pakistan found that the respondents who thought sharia should play a greater role in law were no more likely to support militant groups than the respondents who wanted sharia to play a much smaller role (Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro 2012). Consequently, Fair et al. made a sweeping assertion that “the prospect of [sharia-promoting] Islamist parties coming to power in the wake of the Arab Spring should not necessarily be viewed with alarm” (2012, 713). However, as I have pointed out (Muthuswamy 2014), Fair et al.’s survey is not sensitive enough for studying the impact of a special medium of violent radicalization (such as the small number of mosques led by radical religious leaders, who benefit from sharia’s popularity), in that their survey was dominated by a peaceful majority of sharia-favoring respondents and even those who favored a much smaller role for sharia support militant groups for nationalistic reasons^{1,2}.

In a recent scholarly article, Fair does a partial about-turn by concluding that those who support harsh sharia punishments, such as cutting off thieves’ hands, or the restrictions on women’s public roles tend to support militant groups more, unlike those who view sharia in the context of providing services and security (2015). Here again, I have argued that to understand the pathways between sharia and the public support for militant groups (Muthuswamy 2014), one should study the role of religious leaders in influencing both militant groups and the public (which Fair et al. failed to do), because these leaders grow in influence as sharia gains in popularity. While my previous study took only a few nations into consideration, the current one aims to methodically investigate these correlations for nearly twenty nations across geographic, ethnic, cultural, and wealth divides. This article also gives a measure of the involvement of religious leaders with violent radicalism by correlating the top terrorist groups (in terms of fatalities) for the year 2013 with the affiliated top religious leaders. Furthermore, the current study pursues the likelihood that sharia could be a major platform behind violent Muslim radicalism and explains how sharia forms a basis of the frequently mentioned, but otherwise ill-defined, “radical ideology” (Obama 2015; Castle 2015).

I start with the much-overlooked observation that religious leaders such as clerics or religious scholars have been among the top leaders of all major militant Islamist groups. This is true of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Mohammed Yusuf, Mohammed Omar, and Abdullah

Azzam of the Islamic State, Boko Haram, the Taliban, and al Qaeda (McCants 2015; Sergie and Johnson 2015; Telegraph 2015; Suellentrop 2002), respectively. Moreover, even in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia where the governments have long co-opted religious institutions, a significant subset of the religious leaders have espoused armed jihad (Nielsen 2012)³. In the study noted before, I used the results of a public poll in Pakistan to suggest that over 25% of all religious leaders in that country view jihad exclusively in an armed context (Muthuswamy 2014). These observations ought to provide an impetus to scrutinize the role of religious leaders and the basis of their support in Muslim communities.

Muslim religious leaders have been at the forefront of interpreting and popularizing the scriptures and Islam’s history. Typically, they undergo years of education in special religious schools that use regressive and dated syllabuses (Sedgwick 2001; Ahmed 2004; Shea 2006). Still, the leaders must be able to establish their relevance in the daily lives of their flock in order to be able to significantly influence it. This is where—as an interpretation of Islam—sharia or the so-called Islamic law comes into the picture⁴.

The defining trend of the past centuries is the worldwide embrace of modernity and the socioeconomic advancement brought about by science⁵. Science gave us an unprecedented mastery over nature, and led to societies that were more advanced than earlier ones. As science began to replace religion as a source for understanding the world, secularists began growing in power. Religious leaders felt threatened by these new influences, because science not only contests their worldview, but it also offers a credible alternative. In fact, until around the 1970s Muslim religious leaders increasingly found themselves disconnected from their flock, thanks to the encroaching of modernity. A manifestation of this phenomenon is the rule by secular regimes across the Muslim world and the domination of the public space by moderate elements. Unfathomable as this may seem now, for example in the 1950s, 60s, and even in the 70s, it was common for Kabul women to wear western clothing and mix freely with men (Tornhill 2014). A characteristic of this era was the absence of transnational Islamist militant groups, and violence conducted in the name of Islam was a low-key, localized affair. Evidently, along with other religions, the forces of modernity were pushing Islam into a reformation.

Religious Forces Make a Comeback

Nevertheless, in the ensuing decades, regressive Islamic forces made a comeback.

“Nothing has been more corrosive to the stability and modernization of the Arab world, and the Muslim world at large, than the billions and billions of dollars the Saudis have invested since the 1970s into wiping out the pluralism of Islam—the Sufi, moderate Sunni and Shiite versions—and imposing in its place the puritanical, anti-modern, anti-women, anti-Western, anti-pluralistic Wahhabi Salafist brand of Islam promoted by the Saudi religious establishment” (Friedman 2015).

The rest of this section focuses on identifying the specific aspects of Wahhabism and the channels of their propagation that have contributed to the emergent phenomenon of violent Muslim radicalism.

Manifestations of this phenomenon range from an increased preference for a conservative dress code to the increasing tendency to favor sharia law over modern secular law (Ghoshal 2007; 2008). It is illustrative to explore radicalization of the Muslim minorities in the United Kingdom. A survey conducted in there (Table 1) shows that a significant percentage of the younger British Muslim population supports violence and sharia, unlike the older generation (Policy Exchange 2007). In addition, the age-specific correlation of the radicalization process and increased popularity of sharia suggests that the radicalization trend is a recent phenomenon that coincides with Saudi Arabia's propagation of Wahhabism influencing impressionable young minds. An undercover investigation aired in 2007 revealed that in closed-door gatherings, a prominent mosque in the United Kingdom promoted a harsher form of sharia and advocated intolerance and violence. Moreover, the investigation was able to link the teachings and materials found at the mosque with Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi establishment (Channel 4 2008). Additionally, reports from the United Kingdom indicate that about 100,000 Muslim children attend evening Islamic classes, often held in mosques, for up to two hours a day, where they are taught the basic tenets of sharia and the curriculum often criticizes Jews and Hindus (Gardham and Whitehead 2012; Open Society Institute 2005). It is noteworthy that the clerics imported from Pakistan—a prominent host for many jihadist groups, where sharia is hugely

popular (see Table 2), and where a significant subset of clerics tend to view jihad exclusively in an armed context (Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro 2012; Muthuswamy 2014)—constitute about 50% of all clerics in the United Kingdom (BBC News 2007). When they had power in the United Kingdom (such as through their control of school boards), how did the educated and prominent representatives of the Muslim communities govern? The leaked details of a 2014 government report revealed that certain Muslim-dominated public schools in Birmingham illegally segregated boys and girls, discriminated against non-Muslim students, and restricted the syllabus to “comply with conservative Islamic teaching” (Gilligan 2014).

Saudi Arabia is not only known for its immense oil wealth, but it is also a conservative nation where sharia interpretations provided by religious leaders form the basis of the rule of law (Johnson and Sergie 2014)⁶. In this Saudi construct, sharia is all-encompassing divine law and is seen as an essential guide to life⁷. With this self-serving definition of sharia, religious leaders indeed found a compelling way of inserting themselves into Muslim lives^{8,9}. They have done so at the expense of modernity, because as interpretations of Islam sharia laws vary widely and in general, reflect the cultural norms of the Arab tribes of a bygone era. Although the regressive worldview advanced by sharia narratives discourages wealth creation, the oil largesse easily sustained the sharia-governed Saudi Arabian economy¹⁰.

Saudi Arabia may also be seen as a unique and long-standing laboratory for ascertaining the influence and impact of sharia when it is the law of the land. In this context, it is straightforward to show that sharia causes the spread of violent radical ideas through two examples of religious leaders issuing sharia-based edicts called *fatwas*: one by Nasir bin Hamid al-Fahd in support of al Qaeda (Al-Fahd 2003; Mowatt-Larsen 2010) and another widely-discussed one by dozens of Saudi religious leaders in support of jihadist groups engaged in Syria (Al-Saleh 2015). The causality stems from the fact that the prestige and popularity of sharia are leveraged in order to directly influence the public into taking these *fatwas* seriously; moreover, in Saudi Arabia, a *fatwa* can constitute a law in itself¹¹, designed to directly induce and authorize someone to engage in a specific set of acts. Indeed, it may be more than just a coincidence that Saudi Arabia has suffered from internal jihadist bombings and has been

Table 1: A Policy Exchange survey of British Muslims

	Support for Sharia Law (in %)	Admiration for al-Qaeda (in %)	Support for Killing Apostates (in %)
Between ages 16 and 24	37	13	36
Over 55 years of age	17	3	19

Table 2: Support levels for sharia and religious leaders correlated with jihadist violence

Country	Support for Sharia as the Law of the Land (in %)	Support for Religious Judges (in %)	Support for Religious Leaders in Politics (in %)	Homegrown Jihadist Attacks
Kosovo	20	10	27	No
Albania	12	11	17	No
Bosnia	15	6	17	No
Kyrgyzstan	35	44	46	Weak
Turkey	12	14	36	Strong
Tajikistan	27	33	28	Weak
Kazakhstan	10	14	24	Weak
Azerbaijan	8	8	14	Weak
Russia	42	NA	58	Strong
Malaysia	86	84	82	Weak
Indonesia	72	66	75	Strong
Afghanistan	99	78	82	Strong
Bangladesh	82	71	69	Strong
Pakistan	84	84	54	Strong
Egypt	74	94	75	Strong
Palestinian Terr.	89	75	72	Strong
Tunisia	56	42	58	Strong
Iraq	91	73	57	Strong
Jordan	71	93	80	Weak
Lebanon	29	53	37	Strong
Nigeria	71	NA	NA	Strong

a prominent exporter of militants (Hegghammer 2006). More importantly however, the following reasons substantiate the view that because sharia plays an over-arching role in governance and law—much more than any other feature of the religion in Saudi Arabia—it may be deemed as a prominent platform for legitimizing and popularizing radical ideas there: based upon previous paragraphs, it appears that sharia forms an essential ideological and the *only* legal basis (as “divine” law) for regressive religious leaders to acquire political power, institutionalize themselves in the ruling hierarchy, play a critical role in governance, espouse and sanction violence, and self-perpetuate their status by enforcing sharia (Global Security 2011); through these sharia-derived means, these

leaders are able to influence the outlook and behavior of the public as well.

Since the 1970s, the oil largesse enabled the country to export sharia and armed jihad emphasizing the Wahhabi version of Islam worldwide (MEMRI 2002; USCIRF 2008; Choksy and Choksy 2015)¹². In addition, by providing jobs for millions of Muslim Pakistani and Egyptian guest workers, among others, Saudi Arabia shared its wealth and found a channel to spread Wahhabism. The funds went into constructing and operating mosques and religious schools that preach Wahhabism. The funds also went into training religious leaders; media outreach and publishing; distribution of religious textbooks, and endowments

to universities and cultural centers (MEMRI 2002). A Saudi textbook has described armed jihad as the “pinnacle of Islam” (USCIRF 2008). Not surprisingly, Saudi Arabia also pioneered the sponsorship of armed jihad in a modern context in the form of the Afghan Islamic insurgency of the 1980s. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia-based entities have also recently funded jihadist groups in Pakistan and Syria (Guardian 2014; Black 2013).

A question of immense relevance is how important is the role played by sharia in Saudi Arabia’s successful global spread of violent radicalism-inducing Wahhabism. The discussion in the previous paragraphs suggests that because through its over-arching role sharia has come to define how Wahhabism is viewed and practiced in Saudi Arabia, there is every reason to believe that the country envisions a similar role for sharia in the practice of Wahhabism elsewhere and there indeed exists evidence to back it up (Marshall 2005; Pew Research Center 2005). In fact, the Muslim World League, a leading Saudi government-funded charity that is involved in the spread of Wahhabism (Moniquet 2013), calls on “individuals, communities, and state entities to abide by the rules of the sharia (MWL 2014)”, and a Wahhabi-linked mosque in the United Kingdom has emphasized a harsher form of sharia, just like the one practiced in Saudi Arabia (Channel 4 2008). Even the popular aspiration of sharia as the law of the land (see Table 2 above) is hardly a coincidence, especially when in most Muslim-majority nations, sharia enjoys no such status, but in Saudi Arabia, it does.

Even before the advent of Wahhabism’s propagation, local religious leaders—including Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt, Abul Maududi of Pakistan, and Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran—had placed emphasis on sharia as all-encompassing divine guide to life (Owen 2014; Calvert 2010). Even jihad in an armed context has been part of the main discourse for two reasons: one, as per David Cook, “Muslims have been waging jihad in both military and spiritual forms for 14 centuries” (2004, 134); two, violent extremists can find theological justification for their deeds, as both non-violent orthodox Muslims and violent jihadists interpret the same jihad doctrines quite differently to suit their causes (Wiktorowicz 2006)¹³. Familiar as the narratives of sharia and armed jihad were, apparently no one could sell to the skeptical Muslim masses credibly—until Saudi Arabia came

along with its propagation of Wahhabism—the idea that their standard of living (while still conforming to the religious norms) would dramatically increase if they embraced sharia wholeheartedly. Tarek Fatah explains:

“The middle-class Muslims of Egypt and Pakistan, Turkey and Lebanon, who until now scoffed at the Saudis, using the derisive term “bedoons” of the Arab deserts, were now subservient to them. Allah had spoken. If the Muslim world wished to end its miserable lack of enterprise and education, literacy and liberty, all it had to do was emulate the Saudis, follow the footsteps of those Wahhabi clerics, and inshallah, the heavens would rain down the bounty. And if this did not happen, that would be evidence that the Muslims had not emulated the Saudi example to its fullest” (Fatah 2011, 188).

Indeed, it is most likely that the credibility (as a nation governed *exclusively* by the sharia laws and as a prominent sponsor of armed jihad), resources, and prestige (as the birthplace of Islam and home to its two holiest mosques) of Saudi Arabia played a major role in the increase in popularity of sharia and religious leaders and embrace of armed jihad worldwide. In a modern context, Qatar-based Yusuf Qaradawi, a religious leader and host of the top-rated television program on *Al Jazeera* with a worldwide following, *ash-Shariah wal-Hayat* (Sharia and Life), has done much to popularize sharia (Hilleary 2012)¹⁴. Web portals such as Islam Online, established by Qaradawi in 1997, have also helped to reinforce the aura of sharia by readily providing their own interpretations (2015).

In the context of the propagation of Wahhabism, it is pertinent to find out the extent of support for sharia and religious leaders in countries with significant Muslim populations. According to the aforementioned 2013 Pew Research Center report, in 17 out of 23 nations (Bell et al. 2013), the majority of the Muslims surveyed considered sharia to be the “revealed word of God” and in 25 out of 38 nations (Bell et al. 2013), the majority favored making it the law of the land. In a measure of religious influence, in 10 out of 19 nations (Bell et al. 2013), the majority supported the judging of family and property disputes by religious leaders. Interestingly, in the same report, in 11 out of 20 nations (Bell et al. 2013), the majority of the Muslims surveyed supported at least some political role for religious leaders. A more detailed breakup is

given above in Table 2, along with a measure of violent activism¹⁵.

Importantly, in 18 out of 19 surveyed nations (see Table 2), the extent of religious leaders' religious and political influence correlates with sharia's popularity (Muthuswamy 2015a)¹⁶. The support for religious leaders in politics can be seen as a measure of the leaders' ability to influence the public even on matters outside of religion.

The phenomenon of violent radicalism manifests itself in many ways. While the formation of militant Islamist groups is one mature endpoint of the radicalization process, promotion of violence in the early stages of the process can involve religious leaders' issuance of sharia-based edicts that call for violence. For instance, a religious leader associated with an influential Islamic center in India issued an edict against homosexuality and live-in relationships by prescribing the following violent punishments (in defiance of the rule of law): "A person may be burnt alive, pushed from a high wall or be beaten publically with stones if he indulges into either of the two [behaviors]" (Sharda 2013). While many prominent religious leaders backed this edict, notably, none opposed it (Sharda 2013). Not surprisingly, as part of seeking to self-perpetuate the influence of religious leaders, a 2008 Indian conference attended by thousands of religious leaders asked Muslims "to spend their lives in the country following Islamic sharia and teachings with full confidence" (Upadhyay 2008). To protect the turf of religious leaders and to perpetuate their powerbase, a prominent Indian Muslim religious leader even went to the extent of demanding that "[d]eath penalty or life sentences should be given to those who hurt a person's religious values or disrespect a religious leader" (PTI 2016).

Connecting the Dots: Religious Leaders, Sharia, Violence, and in Between

A question of paramount importance is whether at the global scale religious leaders play a major role in the phenomenon of violent Muslim radicalism. If one measure of such a role is the leadership of terrorist groups, an affirmative answer to the above question arrives in the form of Table 3 where the Islamist militant groups that are either founded or led by these leaders are associated with at least 65% of all worldwide terrorism-related fatalities (Rivinius 2014)¹⁷. The impressionable data in Table 3 calls for focusing

on these follow-up questions in the rest of this section: why do religious leaders have such high-profile leadership positions in Islamist militant groups, what is the basis of the leaders' support, and why are such groups potent and enduring?

As per Table 2, sharia's popularity strongly correlates with the overall influence of religious leaders and the extent of the public support for the leaders' increased political role. Therefore, it is difficult to see anyone else—other than religious leaders—having the unique combination of an exalted status as the primary interpreters of sharia and builders of a bridge between militants and the public and be perceived as having exegetical expertise and masters of the radical ideology (an explanation follows in the next paragraphs). Thus, it is hardly a surprise that religious scholars or clerics are found in essential leadership positions in jihadist groups and that these groups invariably claim to fight for sharia-based governance that puts religious leaders at the top of the power structure. For example, the "most powerful body" within the Islamic State is said to be the Sharia Council, staffed by religious scholars (Barrett 2014, 30). These explanations and the data in Table 2 suggest that a radical religious leaders' basis of support and prestige in a community, first and foremost, is derived from his presumed sharia expertise. Let us take the case of al-Baghdadi. Not discounting his other attributes (McCants 2015), it likely helped his cause that his home base Iraq is highly supportive of sharia and religious leaders (see Table 2). Not surprisingly, radical religious leaders such as Saeed Mohammed, chief of the homegrown jihadist group *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (now known as *Jamaat-ud-Dawa*) have learnt that by calling for more sharia laws in sharia-popular Pakistan they can bask in the media limelight (Roggio 2012; Zee News 2007). Globally, the sharia-derived prominence (see above) has likely enabled the likes of Qaradawi to get media coverage for his calls to invoke armed jihad (Aboudi 2013). In an environment where the public support for sharia is significant, radical preachers have risen. Even though these preachers typically lack formal training in theology via a religious school, they have captured attention by being vocal supporters of sharia and have leveraged this newfound prominence to espouse the radical ideology (Sullivan 2015).

As the extent of public support for religious leaders' political role increases (correlated with sharia's popularity—Table 2), this, in turn, can increase the extent

Table 3: Three most lethal terrorist organizations of 2013

Terrorist Group	Number of Fatalities	Fatalities (in %)	Affiliated High-Ranking Religious Leader
Taliban	2718	28	Mohammed Omar ¹⁸
The Islamic State	1868	19	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ¹⁹
Boko Haram	1731	18	Mohammed Yusuf ²⁰

of the public support for terrorism. This point is validated by an analysis of a 2002 Pew poll conducted in 14 nations with large Muslim populations, which concluded the following: “[t]hose respondents who support a larger role for religious leaders in politics are more likely to support terrorism” (Fair and Shepherd 2005, 72). These correlations can be explained as follows: in communities where sharia is popular, as the primary interpreters of sharia, religious leaders can expect a receptive audience for their politico-religious views such as invoking the jihad doctrine to sanction violence and creating a sense of political grievance (McDowall 2015; Brulliard 2010). Naturally, the followers of these religious leaders not only tend to support terrorism, but also support a larger role for them in politics, as a means for these leaders to assert more influence. That is, increased support for sharia in a community can translate to the same for violent radicalism and/or militant groups, which are avowedly pro-sharia²¹.

In broad terms, the statistics in Table 2 come to define some of the prerequisites for a thriving violent Muslim radicalism in a community: first and foremost, sharia must have a significant following²², because as a counter-narrative to modernity (see the previous section), sharia, in part, defines the religious basis of the radical ideology^{23,24} for the aforementioned militant groups to wage jihad terror wars in order to conquer territory and people, attract fighters and resources^{25,26}, impose their ways in the name of sharia, and even justify violence by invoking sharia (Rana 2013). For example in sharia-popular Malaysia, the link between violent radicalization and sharia becomes all the more apparent with the revelation that the government itself is telling radicals to desist from violence because it is working toward the shared goal of sharia’s full implementation (Abuza 2008). As a result of this link, Malaysia has become a fertile recruitment ground for the Islamic state (Liow 2015), even though it has no significant recent history of militancy. These correlations suggest that the Islamist militant groups are potent and enduring mainly due to two influential mutually-reinforcing entities: sharia and religious leaders.

How important sharia is to the radical ideology can be understood from the fact that the Islamic State apparently requires its new recruits to go through an intensive two-week course in a sharia court (Weiss 2015). Moreover, vast variations in what constitutes sharia interpretations translate into immense variations in the radical ideology. All of this tells us that it is futile to try to counter the radical ideology while ignoring its sharia underpinnings.

Moving beyond public support for violent radicalism, determining under what conditions homegrown jihadist groups form, and if they do, whether they become a significant force is complicated. Even if sharia is popular in a community and even if radical religious leaders have a significant presence, any number of additional inducements—including a weak government (Obasi 2015), a government that encourages jihadist groups in order to advance a foreign policy agenda (PTI 2015), or entrenched political divisions (Banco 2015), and access to armaments—are needed to get to that stage. Arguably however, the less difficult pathway of embracing violent radicalism, either by joining as a recruit of transnational jihadist groups such as the Islamic State in order to fight in its home base (TSG 2015) or by conducting terrorism locally while owing allegiance to these groups, has become a much greater global threat (Sanchez et al. 2016).

A consequence of the high support levels for religious leaders and sharia in certain nations (Table 2) could be that their societies’ outlook and national policies tend to overemphasize religious education. In Pakistan for example, in a 2003 survey, 41% of the responding parents identified religious education as a “top educational priority” for their young children (Nelson 2006, 701). I have pointed out that “until the year 2000—fifty-three years into its birth—Pakistan produced between five hundred to two thousand percent more doctorates in Islamic studies for every doctorate produced in the entire fields of engineering and technology” (Muthuswamy 2011, 4). The religious leaders themselves, in Pakistan and in neighboring India, have stymied governments’ efforts to modernize

education in Muslim religious schools (Abbas 2011; Khokhar 2007; Ahmed 2010). That this mindset may be holding Pakistan back can be understood in a comparison study involving Hindu-majority India (and their respective diasporas in the United Kingdom), with which Pakistan shares history, culture, language, and ethnicity (Muthuswamy 2014). Saudi Arabia suffers from high unemployment rates mainly because its educational curriculum is strong on religion but weak when it comes to imparting skills, and as a result, the country has to employ a very large number of foreigners (Murphy 2011). These situations have led to socio-economic stagnation and boredom, and in turn, made Islamist narratives appealing for youths frustrated by the lack of qualification and/or opportunities²⁷. Even so, their participation in an armed jihad still requires access to firearms, training, travel (Ashley 2015), and jihadist narratives of radical religious leaders.

However, when sharia support levels are low in a country, as per Table 2, conditions do not favor the formation of homegrown jihadist groups or even if such jihadist groups form, they remain relatively weak²⁸. The conditions, as per Table 2, include low support levels for religious leaders (which likely include those who espouse armed jihad²⁹) and the radical ideology's diminished appeal. Moreover, conditions also do not favor those religious leaders who seek to promote violence by invoking sharia. Nor is their message likely to be widely embraced. In addition, scriptures likely hold less influence in such countries because the ones who can credibly invoke them—religious leaders—have low support levels. This suggests that what is in the scriptures may matter less in communities with low sharia support levels and discounts the notion propagated by the likes of Ayaan Hirsi Ali that what is in the scriptures *necessarily* causes violent radicalism (2015). The premise that moderation advances when sharia's and religious leaders' influences are curtailed and when modernity is encouraged, is supported by the emergence of a modern and moderate Turkey, where the long rule by secular regimes, starting with the one led by Kemal Ataturk pursued a policy of sidelining sharia, undermined religious leaders by banishing religious schools, and promoted modernity (Versan 1984)³⁰.

Discussion

When framed in terms of the public support for sharia and religious leaders and correlated with the status

of homegrown jihadist groups, the Pew data presented in Table 2 helps us succinctly understand the impact of Wahhabi Islam's propagation vis-à-vis emergent violent Muslim radicalism. Table 3 points to the need to refocus attention on the role of religious leaders in the violent radicalization process. In this dynamic, even though sharia itself, by and large, does not directly lead to violent radicalism, it aids its progress by providing a platform for religious leaders and others who espouse non-violent and violent radical ideologies, acts as a religious basis of the radical ideology and as a tool for recruiting militants, and seemingly facilitates a governing framework for violent jihadist groups such as the Islamic State. A consequence of the sharia-based edicts of religious leaders is the distortion of the rational thinking processes associated with modernity, since these edicts undercut the cause-and-effect sequence and associate all decisions and practices with "God's will." Moreover, those individual Muslims who hold sharia interpretations in high regard and want to follow them can find themselves influenced by the world-view or "ideology" of the presumed sharia experts such as religious leaders.

In the context of this analysis, it is useful to revisit what President Obama did and did not mention at the February 2015 Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (Obama 2015). He used the word *ideology(ies)* five times but failed to elaborate or identify its basis. While he called upon clerics and scholars to push back against radicals' narratives, he failed to note that their peers most often hold top leadership positions in jihadist groups or that by backing regressive narratives of sharia, reinforcing a sense of grievance, and stoking sectarianism, they are creating conditions for the radical ideology to thrive. He said that terrorists exploit economic grievances and the lack of educational opportunities, but did not mention that religious leaders played a part in inducing these conditions. He did not refer to sharia or Saudi Arabia's propagation of Wahhabism. It is also pertinent to note that British Prime Minister Cameron unveiled a much-anticipated new counterterrorism strategy in October 2015 by proclaiming that "extremism is really a symptom; ideology is the root cause" (Castle 2015), again, without identifying the ideology's basis. In particular, the United Kingdom does not appear to understand the link between sharia and violent radicalism—evidenced by the presence of over 85, mostly mosque-based, government-sanctioned sharia courts that settle financial and family disputes (Webb 2014).

Indeed, the premise that Western leaders may have misunderstood the phenomenon is entirely conceivable—exemplified by the following public acknowledgement by a top Western military leader: “We do not understand the [radical Islamist] movement, and until we do, we are not going to defeat it” (Schmitt 2014). A two-page *Countering Violent Extremism* (CVE) training document produced by the United States Department of Homeland Security correctly cautions against “equat[ing] the desire for sharia law with criminal activity” (DHS 2015). However, it fails to inform that sharia forms a platform for espousing and sanctioning violence.

When sharia constitutes a prominent platform for legitimizing violence in Saudi Arabia (see the 2nd section), and the data in Table 2—moving from column 5 to column 2—shows that the increased extent of violent radicalization elsewhere is generally correlated with the increased support for sharia in a community (along with the increased influence of religious leaders)³¹, it would be wise to view sharia as a major platform behind the espousing and sanctioning of violent radicalism elsewhere. There is another reason to single out sharia: it has come to define a familiar theme many understand and identify with, and it facilitates development of a simple and coherent explanation of the phenomenon of violent Muslim radicalism (Muthuswamy 2015b)³². This is the significance: physics Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg has argued in his book that the underlying “simplicity and rigidity” in an explanation of a phenomenon is “a means to the end of finding scientific explanations and judging their validity” (1992, 149).

Not surprisingly, many Muslims and their religious leaders do not see eye to eye on sharia. Even in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, many find that the *fatwas* can be highly subjective, confusing, and often contradictory (Macfarquhar 2009; Muhammad 2012). Moreover, in Pakistan, jihadists are able to extract favorable *fatwas* from sympathetic religious leaders (Muhammad 2012). To be clear, these attributes are inconsistent with sharia being a law. As a matter of fact, some of these edicts/interpretations are perceived as unlawful opinions—only to be undercut by senior religious leaders (Daragahi 2010). The narrative of sharia being an all-encompassing divine law can be contested on many other grounds. Firstly, challenging this notion of sharia does not constitute contesting the scriptures themselves, but only the right of religious leaders to

characterize their interpretation of sharia as such. Secondly, the issue also is the credibility of religious leaders themselves as sharia scholars, as seen in Pakistan for example, many of them—as the primary interpreters of sharia—are not even literate and most have not completed a rigorous course of religious study (Fair 2012). Alternately, motivated by the Indonesian example (see Endnote [21]), one might wonder if popularizing moderate and inclusive versions of Islam would marginalize radical forces. However, it quickly becomes apparent in the first place that the Wahhabi version of Islam (a mainstay of radical forces) rose in popularity worldwide (including in Indonesia) at the very expense of the moderate ones. Hence, the appropriate strategy for weakening the likes of Wahhabism and others that promote violence is to contest the sharia narratives, as suggested above.

There exist precedents of even the Western governments engaging in religion-centric propaganda. In 2010, the White House’s then top counterterrorism advisor John Brennan proclaimed that, “jihad is a holy struggle, a legitimate tenet of Islam, meaning to purify oneself or one’s community” (Fox News 2010). This effort was aimed at dissuading Muslims from identifying with jihad in an armed context. This tactic failed, because it underestimated the influence and credibility of radical religious leaders in sharia-popular communities. For example, despite being a vocal supporter of armed jihad (Usmani 1977; Norfolk 2007), religious leader Muhammad Taqi Usmani served as a judge in the Shariat Appellate Bench of Pakistan’s Supreme Court for twenty years and still holds highly influential positions in pan-Islamic, sharia-centric organizations (Usmani 2015).

Conclusion

A substantive result of this study is that the conflict we now identify as violent Muslim radicalism has its roots in the form of non-state actors such as religious leaders propagating non-violent and violent narratives based on sharia. Promotion of sharia increases the influence of religious leaders. Thus, the sharia platform enables radical religious leaders to espouse violence and provide leadership to militant Islamist groups. A study of a 2013 terrorism data reveals that the groups influenced by religious leaders are responsible for the vast majority of fatalities induced by terrorist acts worldwide. In addition, sharia’s prestige and popularity appears to have enabled transnational militant

groups such as the Islamic State to recruit even from nations without a significant recent history of militancy. Furthermore, the interplay between sharia and religious leaders has undermined modernity in many Muslim communities. Still, this study discounts the notion that what is in the scriptures necessarily causes violent radicalism. Further research is needed to establish whether sharia's influence could be behind—many of—what are now thought to be independent causes of radicalism (Taspinar 2009).

Thus, from a policy standpoint it is untenable to sidestep sharia and just vaguely mention radical ideology as a cause of extremism. Indeed, calling the sharia bluff as a core part of a counterterrorism approach is central to undermining the very existence of the jihadist groups and the influence of religious leaders (including the Wahhabi variety) who espouse violence or undercut the value of modern education, and yes, the ideology of radicals. Calling this bluff is another way of tackling the popular, but destabilizing, aspiration of unifying all Islamic countries into a Caliphate (WPO 2009).

There are four reasons why this prudent approach of countering sharia's influence should be given serious consideration: one, as pointed out before, it is only through popularizing the sharia narratives that regressive forces were able to stage a comeback at the expense of modernity; two, sharia constitutes a prominent platform for popularizing and legitimizing violent radical ideas in Saudi Arabia; three, as noted, when sharia support levels are low in a country, conditions generally do not favor violent Muslim radicalism; four, as previously noted, sidelining sharia and religious leaders likely facilitated the emergence of a modern and moderate Turkey. In a nutshell, this article calls for a long-term approach in which curtailing sharia's influence should be an important part of the counterterrorism equation. Furthermore, the proposed initiative does not preclude short-term military and diplomatic undertakings. Not least of all, this approach, as history suggests, has a good chance of reinvigorating modernity in affected Muslim communities.

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Endnotes

[1] A vast majority—84% of those polled in Pakistan (Table 2)—favor sharia as the law of the land. A clear signal that this sharia-favoring majority in Pakistan is peace loving is the public support for suicide terrorism in the defense of Islam—only 13% of those polled support it (Bell et al. 2013).

[2] Many of the Pakistan-based militant groups are focused on India, with whom Pakistan has a long history of troubled relations (Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro 2012).

[3] The word “jihad” can be traced back to the Quran. It can refer to internal struggles, inner spiritual battles, or the striving to improve oneself or one’s community. Jihad can also refer to an externally directed armed struggle, such as an (offensive) religious war waged to conquer unbelievers and their lands or a call to defend Muslims under attack by non-Muslims (Mohammad 1985).

[4] Sharia is based on the Muslim holy book the Quran, as well as the Hadiths, which chronicle the sayings and actions of Islam’s founder Muhammad, and the *fiqh*, which is traditional jurisprudence law based upon an interpretation of Islam (Doi 2008). A detailed discussion on sharia pertinent to this article can be found in the scholarship of Kedar and Yerushalmi (2011).

[5] In a sociological context, modernity represents the world led by an industrial civilization with a complex web of institutions that are open to transformation by human intervention (Giddens 1998). A modern society, unlike any preceding one, lives in the future, rather than the past. The view associated with modernity, despite variations, emphasizes personal (and familial) socioeconomic advancement and advocates pluralism.

[6] In an overwhelming number of Muslim-majority nations, a mix of modern and sharia laws prevail (Johnson and Sergie 2014).

[7] One may even say that the sharia-based *hudud* punishments are physically harsh—whipping for

wine-drinking, cutting off hands for stealing, and the death penalty for leaving Islam (Vogel 2000).

[8] A measure of the popularity and influence of religious leaders in Saudi Arabia is that they are among the most-followed Saudis on Twitter (Carey 2012).

[9] The extent to which Saudi Arabia has gone to ensure that its populace conforms to sharia in their daily lives is exemplified by its establishment of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice that employs religious police for sharia-enforcement purposes (Khan 2015).

[10] What makes Saudi Arabia stand out—its religious prestige and its image of a conservative religious nation at the time of the immense oil discovery—may constitute the minimum requirement for a nation to lead an effort to successfully bring back regressive religious forces at a global scale. Conversely, the lack of all of these “credentials,” is the likely reason why a comeback did not materialize in the case of other major religions.

[11] In the recent times, the Saudi state has attempted to establish control over who is authorized to issue *fatwas* (Boucek 2010).

[12] Saudi Arabia is the dominant source of funds and ideology, with Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates playing smaller roles (Guardian 2009).

[13] While some may see this dual interpretation as an opportunity for promotion of pluralism and modernization within the religion, the lack of a recognized central religious authority within Islam dampens such hopes. Moreover, it is hard to see pluralism and modernity advancing in an environment influenced by Saudi Arabia’s propagation of Wahhabism.

[14] According to Bernard Haykel, “Qatar shares the same religious tradition as Saudi Arabia” (2013, 1).

[15] The data in the first four columns of Table 2 are extracted from the 2013 Pew report. I choose to focus on homegrown jihadist groups as they reflect a certain level of maturity of homegrown radicalism. Here, al Qaeda is assumed to be a transnational group without a home base, while the Islamic State’s home base is considered to be both in Iraq and Syria, but elsewhere, it is considered a transnational group. The transna-

tional groups may also have affiliated local homegrown groups. The following designations are chosen to represent the relative strengths of homegrown armed jihadism. The entries in the 5th column are based in part on the 2014 START database (2014), in that the “No” designation I have chosen reflects either no known presence of jihadist groups or only a meager following for transnational ones such as al-Qaeda and without an occurrence of a terrorist attack in the past five years. The “Weak” designation indicates that the country has not witnessed any major terrorist attack by homegrown jihadists in the past five years, although it has an active presence of homegrown jihadist groups (START 2014). The designation “Strong” reflects at least one major act of terrorism within the past five years by homegrown jihadists: Turkey: suspected homegrown Islamic State militants are said to be behind the suicide bombings (Akkoc 2015); Russia: suspected members of the Caucasus Emirate launched suicide bombings in Volgograd (Copeland and Yu 2013); Indonesia: Homegrown militants of the Islamic State are said to be behind the attacks (Cochrane and Fuller 2016); Afghanistan: suspected Taliban attack in Kabul (Shalizi and Harooni 2015); Bangladesh: Ansarullah Bangla Team has claimed responsibility for killing four secular bloggers recently (Associated Press 2015); Pakistan: suspected Pakistani Taliban attack in Peshawar (BBC News 2014); Egypt: suspected militants belonging to Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis are said to be behind the terrorist attacks (Masi 2014); Palestinian Territories: a member of Hamas launched a terrorist attack (Marquardt 2014); Tunisia: suspected members of Ansar al-Sharia carried out the attacks (Amara 2013); Iraq: suspected militants of the Islamic State are said to be responsible for the attack (Dearden 2013); Lebanon: suspected homegrown Islamic State militants are said to be behind the attacks (Botelho, Cruickshank, and Shoichet 2015); Nigeria: suspected members of Boko Haram carried out attacks (Abubakar and Karimi 2015).

[16] Lebanon’s exception from this broad trend is due to the fact that religious leaders there find more support as judges because of the country’s use of sharia in the context of family law (Bell et al. 2013).

[17] The analysis by Jessica Rivinius indicates that in terms of the number of fatalities generated through acts of violence, Islamists groups occupy first eight of the top ten slots (2014). I computed the percentages in fatalities listed in Table 3 by finding the individual

statistics for a terrorist group in relation to the total fatalities for all of the ten groups (Rivinius 2014). According to my calculations, out of the top ten groups, the top eight Islamist groups put together constitute 96.4% of all of the fatalities listed in the table provided in the reference, revealing thereby, dominance of the violence conducted in the name of the religion.

[18] The founding leader—now deceased (Telegraph 2015).

[19] Top leader of the group (McCants 2015).

[20] The founding leader—now deceased (Sergie and Johnson 2015).

[21] While this scenario is apparently true on average at the global level, at the local level, it may be applicable only if there exists a significant following for Wahhabism or local versions of Islam that emphasize violence and if local versions of Islam that deemphasize violence are relatively weak (in my view, this is true of the concerned countries in Table 3—Afghanistan, Iraq, and Nigeria). A counter example is Indonesia; although Wahhabism is also practiced there, and the public support for sharia as the law of the land and support for religious leaders in politics are both high (Table 2), it is far from clear whether the increased public support for sharia is necessarily suggestive of increased support for violent radicalism. This is because of the strong presence of *Nahdlatul Ulama*, an organization that claims more than 50 million members, which preaches an inclusive, tolerant version of Islam and is known for its active campaign against armed jihad (Cochrane 2015).

[22] Although the support levels for sharia are lower in Lebanon and Turkey, and the countries relatively more modern and moderate, the extent of violent militancy is strong there in part due to the ability of the Islamic State in their next-door neighbor Syria, to exploit the porous borders. (I am not categorizing Hezbollah as a terrorist group, because despite its considerable military prowess, the Lebanon-based group has allegedly been involved in just three attacks deemed as acts of terrorism since 1996 (Masters and Laub 2014).)

[23] In addition to a religious basis, there is also a political basis for the radical ideology that revolves around building up feelings of grievance against the

West, stoking sectarianism, etc. (Quiggin 2009; Hassan 2015). They showcase religious leaders' advocacy and help solidify their support base.

[24] Nina Shea makes the point that translated "as 'Islamic law,' state-enforced sharia is better understood as a political ideology . . ." (2005, 196).

[25] Islamist militant groups invariably claim that they are fighting for governance under "god's (sharia) law" (Johnson 2010), and use this as a bait to recruit fighters and find support in local communities.

[26] A number of motivating factors (beyond the religion) are driving recruitment of fighters for the likes of the Islamic State (Gates and Podder 2015). Nonetheless, the Islamic State's stated goal of unifying all Islamic countries into a single Islamic state or a Caliphate governed under sharia laws seems to be the common underlying theme of attraction for the potential recruits (Gates and Podder 2015; Leggiero 2015).

[27] To make matters worse, many of the Muslim-majority nations struggling with the radical Islamist threat also have among the highest population growth rates (Lipka and Hackett 2015).

[28] See Endnote [22] for Turkey and Lebanon ex-

ception.

[29] If anything, in less radicalized communities, religious leaders who espouse violence are less likely to be heard than those who espouse moderate views.

[30] The *sufi* Islamic movement, started in the 1960s by Fehdullah Gulen in Turkey, has aided the country's moderation and modernization by providing avenues for imparting modern education, besides countering the growth of Wahhabism (Zawartz 2009; Balci 2014). One could argue that the early military-controlled secular regimes tolerated the movement, because of its moderate religious outlook and emphasis on modern education.

[31] The Lebanon and Turkey exception to this rule is also, in a roundabout-way, due to sharia's influence. This is because the Islamic State in the nearby Syria owes its legitimacy if not the existence, to purported sharia-adherence.

[32] In the context of the social sciences, a complex, as opposed to a simple, explanation of the radicalization phenomenon can be found in this articulation by political scientist Omer Taspinar: the "root causes of terrorism and violent radicalism are extremely complex, multifaceted, and often intertwined. They resist simplification and easy categorization" (2009, 76).