TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
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CHANGE

CO-EXISTENCE

Struggle Over Scripture:
Innovative approaches to understanding
and countering extremist narratives

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VOX-Pol Conference 2018
Countering Online Extremism

Overview

1   **Context** – Identifying research gap

2   **Content** – Data findings

3   **Counter** – Implications for policy & practice

1

Context

Struggle Over Scripture

Policymakers must recognise that the battle against the extremism of groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda is not against Islam but rather against a distortion of religion

Our research aims to:

- Address a deficiency in data-driven research and analysis of the theological and scriptural nuances of Islamist extremism.

- Promote understanding among policy makers and thought leaders about how Islamist extremism perverts mainstream Islam.

- Equip religious leaders with the arguments and tools required to effectively contest extremist ideologies.

Approach

- Making use of innovative natural language processing approaches, this study of over 3,000 mainstream, Islamist, Salafi-jihadi, and counternarrative texts forms a quantitative picture of the key ideological differences between Islamist extremism, both violent and nonviolent, and the Islamic mainstream.

- The research analysed prominent concepts and the use of scripture and scholarship to justify the distinct religious narratives found in different types of ideological positions across Sunni Islam – providing the basis for an informed response by religious leaders, policymakers, and civil-society organisations to Islamist extremism.

Natural Language Processing

The field of Machine Learning, and the associated application of Natural Language Processing methods, hold great potential for applicability to counterterrorism. As methods that use artificial intelligence principles, these tools can be programmed to work through massive amounts of open source data (including social media) to look for signs of interest to the counterterrorism community… and triage vast amounts of data that can then be looked over more manageably by human analysts.

Counter-Extremism Research Portal

A Spectrum of Religious Content

Mainstream

An aggregated view of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy, drawing on a range of religious documents to create a cohesive control group that captures the broad brush of Sunni scholarly tradition.

Salafi-Jihadi

A transnational religious-political ideology based on a belief in violent jihadism and return to the perceived Islam of the Prophet's followers. This is the worldview espoused by groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Islamist

A modern theopolitical ideology that requires a dominant role for an interpretation of Islam as state law. Although encompassing a broad spectrum, our sample predominantly includes Hizb ut-Tahrir and Muslim Brotherhood texts.

Counter-Narrative

An alternative message that challenges an ideology. Our research includes only those narratives rooted in an Islamic response to extremism.

2

Content

Key Findings

1   Salafi-jihadi ideology is demonstrably distant from mainstream Islam

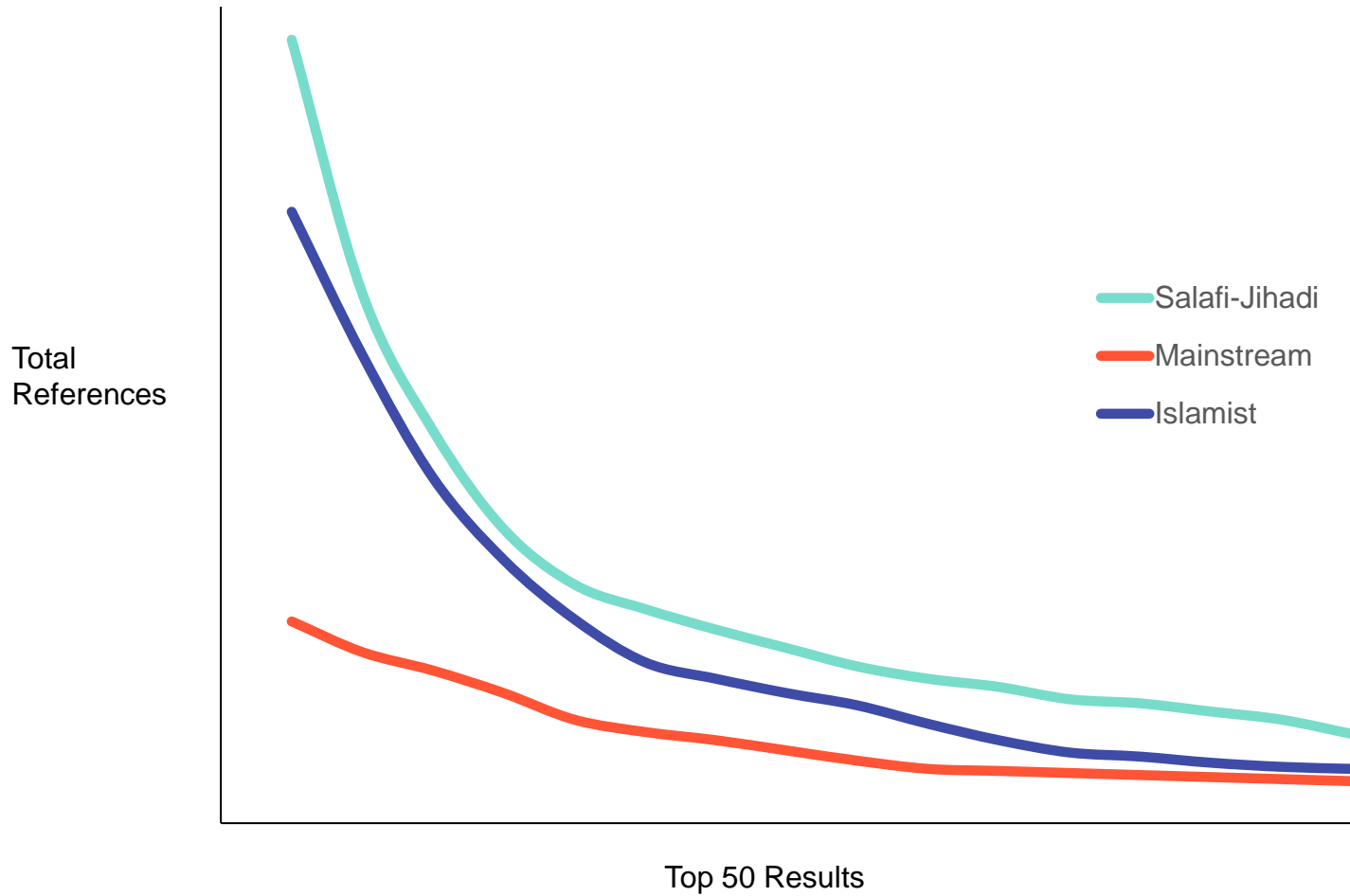**2**   Islamism is more ideologically aligned with Salafi-jihadism than with the mainstream

3   Counter-narratives are failing to contest in the right theological spaces

4   Islamist extremism is at odds with classical interpretations of Islam

5   Extremists quote scripture extensively, but selectively

6   Islamist extremism buries the significance of central Islamic practices

Patterns of Religious Reference

Total References
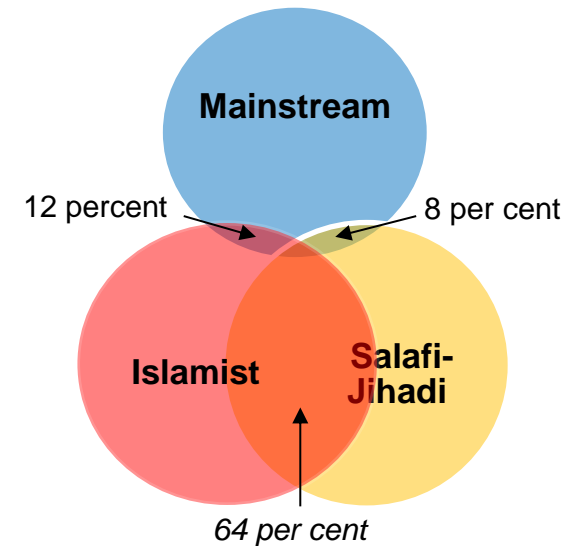
Salafi-Jihadi

Mainstream

Islamist

Top 50 Results

Scripture

Our analysis provides an evidence base for understanding the distinctions between mainstream and extremist interpretations of the Quran and Hadith:

• Understanding how scripture is abused by extremists is essential to undermining their claims to religious legitimacy.

Crossover in most quoted Quranic verses

12 percent

8 per cent

Mainstream

Islamist

Salafi-Jihadi

64 per cent

Scripture

Our analysis provides an evidence base for understanding the distinctions between mainstream and extremist interpretations of the Quran and Hadith:

- Understanding how scripture is abused by extremists is essential to undermining their claims to religious legitimacy.

- The Quran is quoted **five times more** often by Salafi-jihadis than in mainstream material, but their approach is characterised by cherry-picking.

- Considerably higher proportion of Medinan (rather than Meccan) Quranic verses in extremist texts than mainstream:

    - Mainstream texts: **76 per cent**
    - Islamist texts: **89 per cent**
    - Salafi-jihadi texts: **92 per cent**

TABLE 1.2 Most Quoted Quranic Verses in Salafi-Jihadi and Islamist Content

	Salafi-Jihadi		Islamist
1	Al-Anfal, verse 39	1	Al-Anfal, verse 39
2	Al-Tawbah, verse 14	2	Al-Maida, verse 51
3	Al-Anfal, verse 60	3	Al-Anfal, verse 60
4	Al-Mumtahanah, verse 4	4	Al-Anfal, verse 17
5	Al-Maida, verse 54	5	Al-Tawbah, verse 111
6	Al-Tawbah, verse 111	6	Al-Mumtahanah, verse 4
7	Al-Haj, verse 40	7	Al-Haj, verse 40
8	Al-Maida, verse 51	8	Al-Tawbah, verse 29
9	Al-Tawbah, verse 38	9	Al-Baqarah, verse 120
10	Al-Baqarah, verse 249	10	Al-Mujadila, verse 22

Scripture

Case Study: Interpretations of Surat al-Baqarah:256

Mainstream

A mainstream document states this verse promotes the principle that in Islamic law there is no compulsion in religion, and the verse must be read in context.

Salafi-Jihadi

An al-Qaeda document ignores the part of the verse that states the compulsion in religion, and focuses on the second part that distinguishes the right course from the wrong.

Islamist

A Jamaat-e-Islami text states that Allah granted religious freedom, and clarifies that it is the duty of the prophets and their followers to show the true path with conviction.

Counter-Narrative

Fatwa condemns violent jihad and attacking civilians quotes the verse in reference to religious freedom.

Concepts

Our research explores the different 'arsenal of ideas' deployed across categories of religious content, allowing us to analyse the distinct ideas that arise from different interpretations:

- Conceptual cross over:
  - Salafi-jihadi and mainstream: **46 per cent**
  - Islamist and mainstream: **52 per cent**
  - Salafi-jihadi and Islamist: **70 per cent**

- Certain religious ideas can have both violent and non-violent interpretations – e.g *caliphate*, *tawhid*, *jihad* – extremists rely much more on these disputed concepts.

- Jihadi texts are focused on violence, politics, and Sharia, whilst mainstream texts focused on personal piety and daily religious practice.

TABLE 2.1 Most Referenced Concepts in Mainstream, Islamist, and Salafi-Jihadi Content
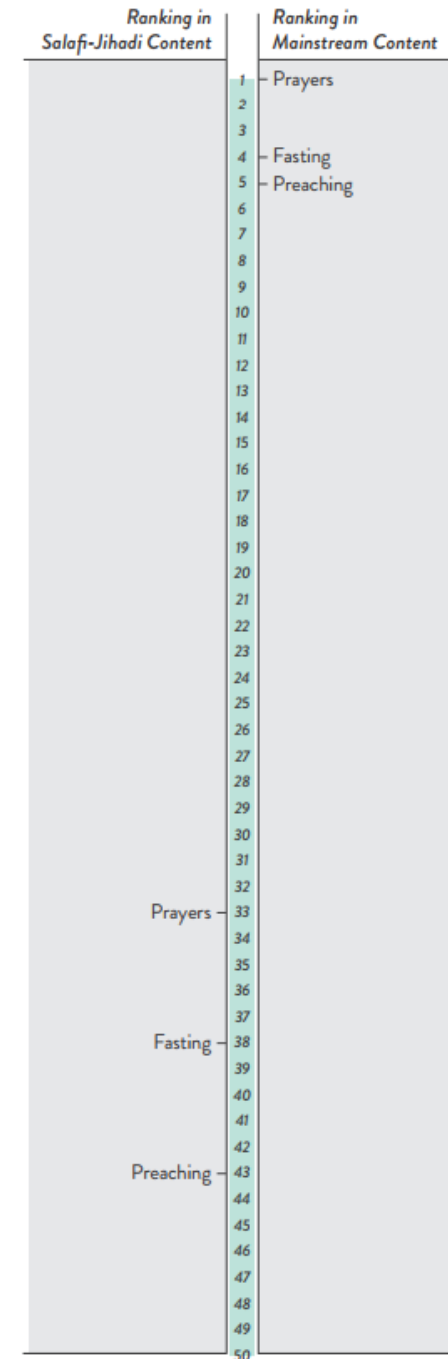
	Mainstream	Islamist	Salafi-Jihadi
1	Prayers	Jihad	Jihad
2	Performing Islamic duty	Worship	Mujahideen
3	Islamic finance	Sharia law	Islamic state
4	Fasting	Islamic state	Caliphate
5	Preaching	Caliphate	Non-Muslims
6	Non-Muslims	Temporal world	Polytheism
7	Ummah	*Tawhid*	Martyrdom
8	Praying	Polytheism	Companions of the Prophet
9	Believers	Non-Muslims	Performing deeds for the sake of Allah
10	Temporal world	Proselytisation	Islamic pledge of allegiance

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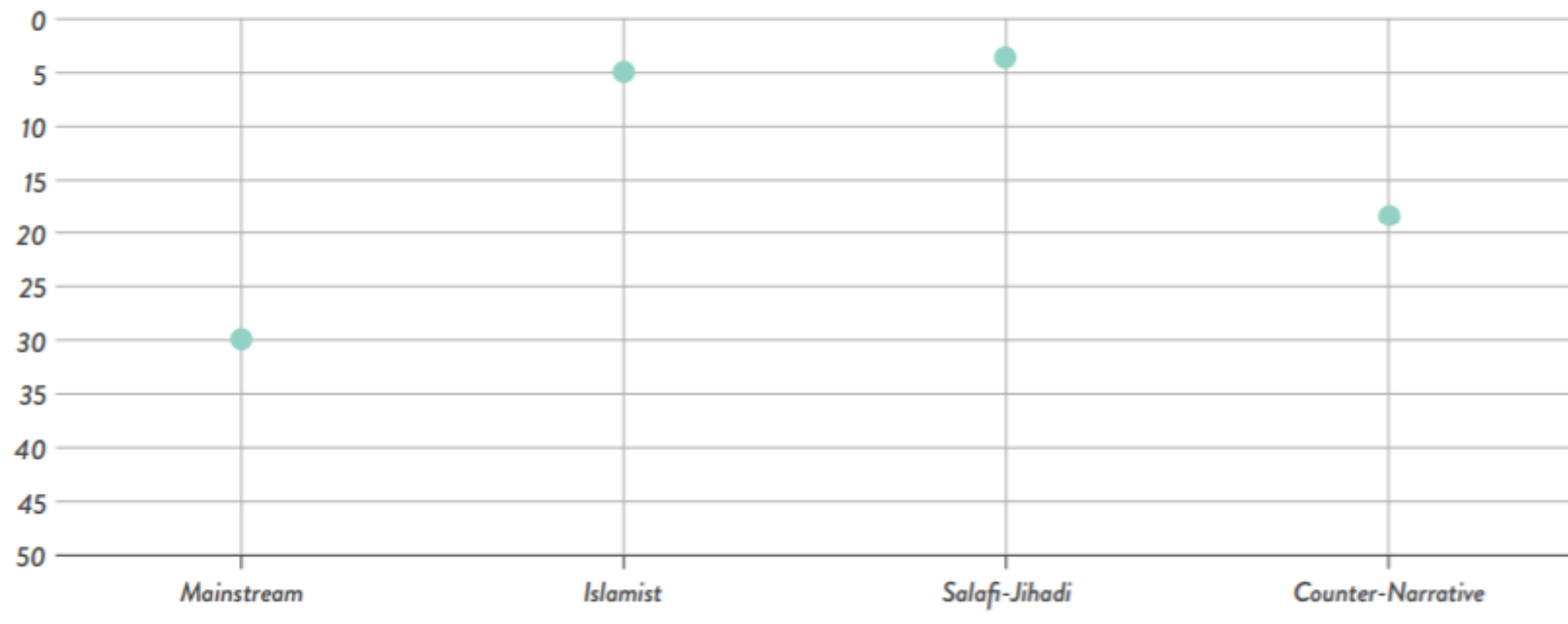FIG. 2.2 Religious Concepts in Salafi-Jihadi and Mainstream Content

Concepts

Case Study: Textual Treatment of the Caliphate

The concept of the caliphate has been the subject of renewed debate since ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the existence of the so-called Islamic state across Iraq and Syria on 29 June 2014.

FIG. 2.4 Ranking of the Concept 'Caliphate' Across Content Types
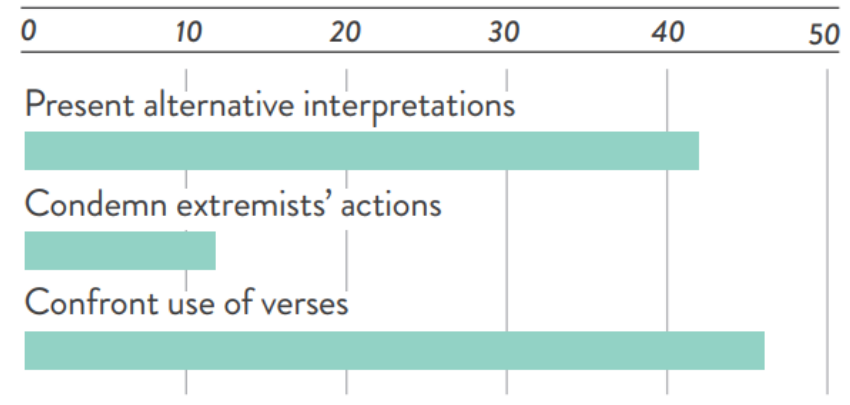
3

Counter

Effectiveness of Counter-Narratives

Counter-narratives are failing to contest in the right theological places:

- Only **16 per cent** of the central scriptural references used by Salafi-jihadis to justify their actions are substantively addressed in the counter-narrative content analysed.

- Some **40 per cent** of the key ideological concepts of Salafi-jihadism are not prominently tackled in counternarratives.

- Counter-narrative approaches largely fail to balance rebutting the false claims of extremists with providing compelling alternatives that reclaim religious discourse from Islamist and jihadi ideologues.

Counter-Narrative Uses of Scripture

Per cent of references

	0	10	20	30	40	50

Present alternative interpretations

Condemn extremists' actions

Confront use of verses

"Counter-narratives draw on the smallest range of Quranic verses of all content types. Counter-narratives are tailored towards attacking a specific worldview: the vast majority explicitly taking aim at Salafi-jihadi ideology. Many are not focused on articulating a comprehensive alternative worldview."

Conceptualising Counter-Narratives

An alternative message that challenges an ideology. This may include religious or nonreligious messaging but for the purposes of this research includes only those narratives rooted in an Islamic response to extremism.

Counter-narratives are – by definition – tailored towards attacking a specific worldview. Efforts should take on the key arguments peddled by extremists but are currently failing to contest in the right theological places.

Religious leaders should develop counter-narratives that:

- Offer a balanced combination of approaches to reclaim religious discourse from the extreme ideologues, by demonstrating the aberration of extremists, taking on their claims, and offering coherent alternatives.

- Confront directly the parts of scripture most cited by extremists and unpack the concepts they most focus on, to offer alternative interpretations. This will help prevent extremists from defining the rules of the game in the battle of ideas.

- Undermine extremists' claims by revealing the selective and narrow references to scripture they use to affirm their ideological positions.

Implications for Policy & Practice

1 Assert the distinctions between Islamist extremism and mainstream Islam in the political debate

2 Facilitate active participation of religious leaders in efforts to counter extremism

3 Challenge, don't shy away from, extremist use of scripture

4 Improve accessibility of mainstream Islamic content, particularly online

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Thanks for listening!

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