

## Interview

## 'Lack of critical introspection' a problem in Islam today, says Quilliam's Adam Deen

Mahmud el-Shafey

Adam Deen is an ex-Islamic extremist seeking to fight Islamic extremism. After being promoted to managing director of the Quilliam Foundation, a counter-extremism think-tank, Deen finds himself confronting an increasingly polarised discourse about Islam in the West.

"I think my new role is more to build on the success of Quilliam, not so much to change what they've been doing but to complement it. One area we particularly need to focus on is claiming more of the ground in the Islamic intellectual space, putting forward a more moderate and pluralistic reading of Islam," Deen told The Arab Weekly in an interview.

Deen is a former senior member of the banned al-Muhajiroun group, which was led by infamous British preacher Anjem Choudary, who has been sentenced to more than five years in prison after being convicted on charges of inciting support for the Islamic State (ISIS).

The son of Turkish immigrants, Deen had a keen interest in learning about Islam as a young man and became radicalised while attending university. After becoming disillusioned with radical Islam over a period of years, he left al-Muhajiroun in the mid-2000s to pursue a more tolerant vision of Islam. He joined Quilliam in November 2015 as head of outreach and in September was promoted to managing director.

"Being a former extremist, we have an insight into the inner workings of the extremist mindset and the ideas they hold

on," Deen said. "I think extremism cannot be totally grasped unless you were one before. As much as it is to do with ideas, it's also experiential."

For organisations such as the Quilliam Foundation, perhaps the biggest problem is that it is ploughing a lonely furrow regarding the popular discourse about Islam in the West.

"One of the biggest challenges in this field is that we have two kinds of polarised views. One that says that it [extremism] has nothing to do with Islam... and the other side that says it's everything to do with Islam and Islam is the problem. Quilliam is the middle ground, the voice of reason, to balance these two out," he said.

"We represent the silent majority [of Muslims] that want a more inclusive and tolerant Islam. I think we speak for that majority who have been silent for some time and we want to take someone who is at the crossroads and help him."

Deen has little time for those Muslims who refuse to acknowledge the problems that Islam is facing, particularly the rise of Islamic extremism. "If we understand Islam to be our scholarly tradition, our interpretation, then we have to say 'Yes, there is a problem.'"

"The challenge is to say 'Yes, some of our great scholars in the past got it wrong.' And that takes courage. There is a lack of critical introspection [by Muslims]. We are being held back by a [scholarly] tradition that is unquestioningly revered. That needs to change," Deen said.

It is views such as this that have led Deen and the Quilliam Foundation to being accused of being in the government's pocket, particularly their



backing of the government's counterterrorism Prevent strategy, which is strongly opposed by some sections of society. Horror stories of teachers referring students to the authorities for donning the hijab or discussing religion have been widely reported in the media after the Prevent Order went into effect earlier this year.

"In principle, Prevent makes perfect sense. It is about safeguarding children in the same way we would try to safeguard children from any other kind of toxic view," Deen said. "But it has had some problems and what it fundamentally comes down to is a training gap. That training gap has resulted in Prevent being misapplied."

"I don't always think it is malicious. I think there is a kind of agenda that is driven by certain Islamist organisations that want to spin it that way," he said.

Quilliam is seeking to provide teachers with training to help

them spot genuine signs of radicalisation and deal with this phenomenon.

"The overall response [from teachers] is one that is quite anxious, sometimes even hostile but by the end of the training... there's a sense of relief actually that now they understand and have the confidence to tackle these issues," Deen said.

In addition to its domestic operations, Quilliam has set its sights on new horizons, including North America where the think-tank is preparing to open a branch in the United States at a time when discourse about Islam and Muslims has been a major feature of a divisive presidential election campaign season.

"There is a place for Quilliam in the US and I think it's going to be even more important given the heightened tensions now," Deen said.

Mahmud el-Shafey is an Arab Weekly correspondent in London.

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## The Quietist fight against jihadism

Ibraheem Juburi

Quietist Salafism is an ultra-conservative brand of Sunni Islam considered by some a viable intellectual

antidote to the militant Salafism employed by the Islamic State (ISIS) and other extremist factions. Its practitioners adhere to the same Salafi principles but shun political involvement.

Moderate Muslims, being short of the scriptural knowledge to mount a successful theological challenge to the aggressive jihadist narrative, are perceived by many experts as lacking the authority to convince potential offenders to remain peaceful in their pursuit of purist version of Islam.

Quietist Salafis, on the other hand, are supposed to speak in language that ultra-conservative Muslims understand. Armed with a technical and thorough understanding of the ideas that drive people to commit violent crimes in the name of Islam, they claim to possess a counter-narrative to these ideas rooted in scripture.

Graeme Wood in *What ISIS Really Wants*, published March 2015 in the Atlantic magazine, puts forth the idea that supports for a passive version of Salafism could be a powerful tool against the violent tendencies of groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS).

"(Q)uietist Salafis, as they are known, agree with the Islamic State that God's law is the only law and they eschew practices like voting and the creation of political parties," Wood wrote. "But they interpret the Quran's hatred of dis-

cord and chaos as requiring them to fall into line with just about any leader, including some manifestly sinful ones."

Jacob Olidort, author of *The Politics of 'Quietist' Salafism*, disagrees. Asked about the prospect of backing Quietists, Olidort told the Brookings Institution: "This proposal, while tempting, can lead down a dangerously slippery slope. 'Quietism,' or abstaining from political involvement or activism, is merely a placeholder rather than a principle for most Salafi groups."

Salafis are Sunnis who mould their beliefs and actions around a particular interpretation of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate companions in an attempt to emulate the religion's earliest days.

The sect is not homogeneous but its reputation suffered in recent years because of groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. The majority of Salafis are nonviolent and those who understand and adhere to the texts but refuse to carry it into a realm of violence are those who could be of persuasive importance.

"Their arguments are very close to each other [Quietists and jihadis]," said Joas Wagemakers, an expert on Salafi ideology and assistant professor at Utrecht University. "They use the same concepts, the same scholars, the same books, the same reasoning but there are limits to this."

Yasir Qadhi, American Sunni Muslim scholar and dean of Academic Affairs at Al-Maghrib Institute, said the argument from authority is one way of engaging the jihadist narrative. "Salafis very much admire scholarship," he said. "One way is quoting fatwas from Salafi authorities that denounce

terrorist tactics and to claim that the modern jihadi Salafis don't have reputable Islamic scholars in their ranks."

Wagemakers called for caution in this approach. "While you might succeed in preventing jihadi Salafis from using violence for example, you are at the same time enabling a group [Quietists] to spread a message. This message is a deeply social conservative one," he said.

Qadhi countered: "Being conservative in one's religious or moral values does not equate to being radical or to being militant. One of the mistakes that many have done is to stigmatise conservatism and calling it one step away from jihadism."

They did agree that it is not just interpretation of scripture that accounts for the fissure between the strands. "It is also to do with pragmatism," Qadhi said. "One of the most effective arguments is: 'Look around you, what has radical Islam ever done for the umma?'"

Wagemakers agreed, adding that perhaps a strictly theological debate would be best avoided. "If one were to adopt the argument and sources these people have, the jihadis actually have better arguments than the Quietist Salafis. So if you are to use them, you must tread lightly or you might end up confirming the views of jihadist Salafis, giving them even more ammunition," he said.

The risk in backing Quietists is that the conceptual leap to jihadism is small. Recently, hundreds of thousands of Quietists have become politically active, epitomised by the Nour Party in Egypt. This may not be a direct shift to terrorism but it certainly puts into question the consistency of their

peaceful appeal.

In Algeria, the state promoted peaceful Sufism (mystical Islam) to tackle radicalism and reports have shown limits. A 2011 poll indicated that, although many people saw the Sufis as peaceful and tolerant, they viewed some teachings as straying too far from Islamic jurisprudence to take them seriously.

Saudi Arabia has employed a different method, with more positive results. Wagemakers described the Saudis' deradicalisation schemes as similar to abstinence-based drug recovery programmes. "They offer solutions that Western countries and other Arab countries cannot possibly offer," he said. "For example, they supply them with a wife, a car, a job, a house; bringing stability to their lives."

The Saudi approach treats potential offenders as victims rather than criminals. Qadhi said he considers this a more accurate representation of the root problem.

"The primary cause for this strand of radicalism is not simply an interpretation of the Quran," Qadhi said. "Rather, these strands are clearly a counter reaction to political circumstances, to social and military invasions and to the propping up and disposal of dictators."

Some experts say the Saudi deradicalisation programmes have shown limits with a percentage of "programme graduates" returning to jihadism.

Even then, backing one conservative group to counter another does not offer any guarantees, considering the groups' inconsistency both intellectually and in practice.

Ibraheem Juburi is an intern with The Arab Weekly.

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