

# A Response to Murad Ismayilov's Authoritarian Patriarchy, Racism, and the Crisis of Knowledge: Towards a "De-Radicalization" of the Global Religious Space

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In an opinion concerning the recent radicalization of Muslims and the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), Murad Ismayilov makes a number of unsubstantiated assumptions in his claim that there are only three reasons behind this radicalization: 1) the lack of religious knowledge of Muslims, 2) lack of social justice in the Muslim East, and 3) the lack of tolerance towards Muslims in the secular West. In my response, my aim is to point out the shortcomings of Ismayilov's arguments which, hopefully, can be redressed by further elaboration and evidence. My whole discussion will be based on the abovementioned three points and I will ignore personal stories that Ismayilov uses to strengthen his arguments in his article.

At the beginning of his article, Ismayilov writes that associating Islam with radicalism is "the product of Western and post-Soviet secular media" which "has evidently been *designed* to serve *the* elite's political agenda" both in the West and in the Eastern Muslim-majority countries (emphasis added). At the end of this sentence, the author cites his own book without indicating any page numbers and since I was unable to find and read the book, like, I believe, virtually all of our readers, I must ask: Who is this elite? What exactly is this elite's political agenda? How can we know that

the current discourse on Islam and radicalism has been *designed* by some group of people in order to serve “the elite’s political agenda”? These are serious accusations that need to be defended. The author also implies that ISIS might be a puppet which is “masterminded by certain forces in the West.” Thus, I have no other option but to insist on an explanation: How do we know this? What are these Western *certain forces*? How many are they?

In addition to these unwarranted claims by the author, the language that Ismayilov uses (*designed to serve, the elite’s political agenda, and certain forces in the West*) is quite similar to the language used by Azerbaijani political experts and journalists on AzTV when they talk about *foreign dark forces, anti-Azerbaijani centers, certain foreign circles* in the Western countries that plot against the Azerbaijani state ([see Novruzov 2018](#)) This is an interesting similarity or a coincidence that can be elaborated in another article.

Later the author claims that authoritarian governments and oppressive family structure of the Muslim East as well as racism and prejudices towards Muslims in the West “pushed” young Muslims to “embrace” ISIS. Most importantly, Ismayilov argues that these two factors are rather similar, that is, racism has effects on Muslims similar to those of state authoritarianism and oppressive families. Therefore, he characterizes negative public opinion in the West towards Muslims as “a prime factor breeding radicalism and nurturing intolerance among Muslims themselves.” Nevertheless, Ismayilov’s “simple explanation” of the roots of radicalization in the Muslim East (which is just one short paragraph) does not really explain much. How it is reasonable to argue that state authoritarianism as well as patriarchal (and oppressive) family structure in, let us say, Iraq, Syria, Chechnya or Kazakhstan are the only reasons behind the recent Muslim radicalization? Building ISIS can hardly be the only possible reaction to authoritarian rule and oppressive family in these countries. Why did not the non-Muslim population of

Iraq, Syria and Kazakhstan, for instance, have the same reaction to state authoritarianism and oppressive family structure in their countries? Why did not they also become as radical as their (Sunni) Muslim compatriots? Why did some Muslims join ISIS while the others did not? What was the reaction of Muslim women to state authoritarianism and Western racism? In addition, I suppose Muslims are not the only group facing racism and prejudice in the West; however, do other oppressed groups react at least in the proportional way to the “symbolic violence” in the West?

Moreover, Ismayilov claims that even Western scholarship has a negative attitude towards religion and Islam. In order to support his claim, he cites [a study](#) conducted at Chicago University by neuroscientist Jean Decety and his colleagues in which 1170 children between ages 5 and 12 participated from five countries (Canada, China, Jordan, Turkey, USA, and South Africa). The study concludes that children raised in religious families have a tendency to be more aggressive and radical compared to their counterparts raised in secular families. Interestingly and without providing any evidence whatsoever, Ismayilov goes on to write that this “statement (...) was apparently *designed to serve* as a ‘scientific’ validation of many secularists’ own pre-established perception of religion (and *Islam in particular*) as evil and religiosity as an inherently negative, undesirable phenomenon” (emphasis added). Now how do we know that? What are the tools or powers that Ismayilov uses to identify the *intention* of authors? Or how does he derive this implication from the result of this study? How does Ismayilov know that the authors of the study particularly *aimed* to depict Islam as inherently negative? This study was conducted by seven scholars (Jean Decety, Jason Cowell, Kang Lee, Randa Mahasnes, Susan Malcolm-Smith, Bilge Selcuk, and Xinyue Zhou) and Ismayilov needs to show that at least some of these scholars purposefully aimed to depict religion and particularly Islam negatively.

The main concern of anybody analyzing any study should be the

methodology rather than the alleged intention of its authors. However, Ismayilov does not discuss any methodological or statistical problem of the cited study. Then, let me ask: Is there any problem in the methodology of this study or is the research design used by the authors of this study problematic? If Ismayilov analyzed the questions that children were asked in this study, did he find any problem in those questions? Who among neuroscientists and scientists in other related fields has criticized this study and for what reasons exactly? Is there any error in the statistical analysis of the study? Maybe Decety and his colleagues simply found this result without any intention to depict a negative picture of religion? Based on what *evidence* does Ismayilov accuse them? Maybe Ismayilov is right but we are not presented with *any* evidence.

Later Ismayilov discusses the problem of religious ignorance among Muslims and its effects on the recent radicalization of Muslims. His argument is that there is nothing inherently radical in Islam and due to their ignorance of their own religion, Muslims have become “easy prey for manipulation [and] misled into radicalism.” Since this issue is not my expertise, I am agnostic on to what extent Muslims are ignorant of their religion and exactly how this ignorance plays a role in radicalization. Let this point be discussed by others.

I would like to ask Ismayilov to explain exactly what does he mean when he says that the authoritarian governments in the Muslim East “have embraced modernity as their legitimating creed”? And what are these countries (i.e. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran or Pakistan)? How many are there? Furthermore, he claims that “in a Western context (...) modernity and consumerism have taken over as the popular religion (and the principal logic of social control).” This is a strong argument without any presented evidence. First, if modernity and consumerism count as religion, then what is Ismayilov’s definition of religion? In addition, how do we know that modernity and consumerism

have become the popular religion of the West? Based on what evidence can we support this argument? Also, how do we know that this “popular religion” has become “the principal logic of social control”? Based on what evidence can we support this argument?

In the same subsection, the author mentions “sacred knowledge” and “epistemological rift.” First, what is sacred knowledge? How many forms of sacred knowledge can be identified? What are the differences between sacred and non-sacred (“material” in his words) knowledge? What are the differences between sacred and religious knowledge? If today I establish my own religion with its holy book and find a few followers, would my newly written holy book be considered (a part of many forms of) sacred knowledge? Second, this epistemological rift also needs an explanation. What is it and why did it occur?

Finally, I feel obliged to note that by enumerating three factors that pushed Muslims to “embrace the likes of ISIS,” Ismayilov does not discuss the responsibility of those individuals who join radical organizations. Suppose that I am an ignorant Muslim and a citizen of an authoritarian country living in a traditional and oppressive family. Because of these reasons, I decide to join IS. Now who should be blamed first? Or suppose that I am a first generation Muslim living in Germany who faces everyday racism. Thus, I become angry and decide to join IS. Again, who should be blamed first? Nobody has put a gun to my head to prevent me from reading the Quran in order to overcome my religious ignorance. Similarly, many might try to manipulate me, but since I am an adult *I am the one, first and foremost, who should be held responsible for my actions and decisions*. Also, I might indeed experience negative public attitudes because of my religious views, however, it does not give me any reason whatsoever to radicalize or join terrorist organizations. One can object that emphasizing the personal responsibility of a radicalized Muslim contributes nothing to the argument of Ismayilov’s article. However, as a student of political philosophy, I

would still insist that when we analyze a problem, we need to need to explicitly recognize all the participants and their share of responsibility in our map in order to be able to identify the fair share of responsibility of each participant.

<https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/authoritarian-patriarchy-racism-and-the-crisis-of-knowledge-towards-a-de-radicalization-of-the-global-religious-space/>