REASSESSING THE CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS OF ISLAMIC RADICALIZATION: THEORETICAL CHALLENGES AND RESEARCH TRENDS

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The radicalization phenomenon has captured the attention of the academic community, considering the need to understand its conceptual elements and to analyze the impact of the main causes that trigger the radicalization process. On the other hand, the rationale to elaborate on this article is that there is no unanimously accepted definition of radicalization at the academic level, and the causes that determine the radicalization process are explained reductively most of the time. Thus, what this article proposes is to review the specialized literature regarding the theoretical delimitations of radicalization, aiming for a definition as comprehensive as possible that would characterize in a holistic manner the process of Islamic radicalization. Also, another objective of the paper seeks to identify the challenges of the academic community regarding the conceptual elements of the phenomenon, using a methodology based on the confrontation of different theories through which the process of Islamic radicalization is explained.

Keywords: *literature review; Islamic radicalization; theoretical challenges; research trends; conceptual analysis.*

Preliminary considerations

Researching the radicalization phenomenon has generated different approaches at the academic level, similarly to the challenges generated by understanding the causes and factors that determine the manifestation of terrorism. While the academic

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research focuses predominantly on understanding the causes and factors that trigger the radicalization process, practitioners essentially report on identifying the early warning signs of the advanced stage of radicalization (Drăgan, 2023) in order to prevent the materialization of a terrorist attack, as well as the effectiveness of de-radicalization or disengagement programs at national level.

The purpose of the current article is to evaluate the particularities exposed by the relevant theories that explain the manifestation, as well as the conceptualization of the phenomenon in various forms, in relation to their applicability for the typology of Islamic radicalization. In this sense, the objective of the article is to develop a definition as comprehensive as possible regarding the manifestation of Islamic radicalization and to equally nuance the interpretations of the main theories that explain the development of the radicalization process.

The article's relevance for the academic community resides in the contribution made to the re-evaluation of the conceptual aspects related to the study of this phenomenon, as well as to underline the current challenges for the academic community regarding the understanding of the radicalization process.

The methodology used for the article was firstly based on the review of the specialized literature and the collection of current interpretations from the art of knowledge regarding the manifestation of radicalization. In a second stage, it comprised the refinement of the theoretical study by two criteria. Thus, the first criterion consisted in narrowing the area of interest in relation to the theoretical applicability of the typology of Islamic radicalization. Also, the second criterion consisted of the identification of relevant theories for understanding the phenomenon, appreciated in terms of the application and use of these theoretical tools in de-radicalization or disengagement programs, and subsequently the nuance of these concepts in relation to the new approaches from the art of knowledge.

The usefulness of the research lies in the evaluation of current interpretations, considering the identification of existing gaps in the state of knowledge. Thus, in order to quantify the research objectives, the article aims to answer the following research question: What are the conceptual challenges regarding the explanation of the Islamic radicalization process?

1. A Review of the Conceptual Framework for Islamic Radicalization

Radicalization, which has become a subject of interest for research, especially since the 2000s, is understood by some theorists as a subject of confusion (Sedgwick, 2010) or lacking an unanimously accepted conceptual approach (Zin Derfoufi, 2020) in relation to the definition, framing a theoretical understanding of the causes and factors that accelerate or influence the manifestation of this process (Awan et al., 2012).

In a first approach, the concept of radicalization is defined as "the adoption of extremist beliefs and ideas, a fact that determines their channeling for the purpose of political actions to delegitimize authority" (Zin Derfoufi, 2020) or "the incorporation of this extreme vision, rejected by society for the purpose of legitimizing the use of violence to quantify societal or political change" (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). It is observed that radicalization in this sense is defined from the perspective of the cognitive dimension of people and highlights the segregation of beliefs adopted by society's values through an extreme approach that seeks to achieve change through violence. However, these definitions are insufficiently explored from a conceptual point of view, from the perspective of the fact that radicalization involves a social and psychological process regarding the adoption of a violent political or religious ideology (Horgan, 2008) which is not comprised inhere.

In a second approach, other definitions focus on characterizing the concept as "a process that involves both a psychological and a social dimension, from the perspective of incorporating extremist views by changing previous conceptions and perceptions" (Porter &Kebbell, 2011) and subverting the societal order (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010), or, "the process by which individuals or groups change their previous beliefs, adopt an extremist view, and choose to proclaim or practice violence to achieve their political goals" (Neumann, 2013). Thus, in this approach, referring to the character of radicalization as a social and psychological process, the gradual development of this process is an essential feature; there are very few cases in which radicalization starts suddenly.

As a rule, "the adherence to an extremist ideology and the change in the set of beliefs and perceptions about society are gradual, but without implying a linear transition" (Della Porta&LaFee, 2012). Thus, the unpredictability of "the evolution of the radicalization process can also be approximated from the perspective of the fact that multiple scenarios are possible, starting from the advancement of the radicalization stage, engaging in acts of terrorism" (Sedgwick, 2010), "stagnation of the process, or disengagement" (Horgan, Braddock, 2010). Therefore, this feature is emphasized by conceptualizing radicalization as "a social and psychological process of commitment to extremist political or religious ideology that may not necessarily lead to violence but which presents risk factors for it" (Horgan, 2008) or "a process of gradual change and transformation involving different stages" (Helfstein, 2012), but "without having linear, clear, or sequential steps, through the existence of internal and external variables" (Della Porta&LaFee, 2012) that can speed up or slow down the process (Al Lami Mina, 2009).

Moreover, although the gradual characteristic of the radicalization process has been explained by some authors through four stages (Borum, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2005; Sageman, 2004), seven phases (Sinai, 2012), eight stages (Taarnby, 2005) or scales towards engaging in terrorist actions (Moghaddam, 2005), as well as

re-evaluated from the perspective of utility (Lygre et al, 2011), this trait must be understood as being determined by three essential variables: "the motivational component through the search for personal meaning, the ideological component in the meaning of the legitimization of the means of violence and the subject's receptivity to the incorporation of ideological elements, as well as the socialization side through networks and group dynamics that can give dynamic to the radicalization process" (Kruglanski et al, 2014).

Compiling the both sets of the approached definitions can emphasize the following aspects:

a. The applicability of "the concept of violence in radicalization does not automatically imply the finality of engaging in terrorist actions" (Hamid, 2015), but it can contain elements such as the dissemination of jihadist propaganda, attracting new people to share a violent ideology, and spreading the goals of hijacking and undermining authority and societal order.

b. The process of radicalization must be defined from the perspective of combining the cognitive side with the behavioral one, in the sense of understanding the impact at the level of cognition following the incorporation of extremist beliefs and violent ideological elements (Demant *et al*., 2008), but also from the perspective of determined behavioral changes or those imposed by ideological normativity. Thus, even if not all cases of radicalization also involve visible behavioral changes of the subjects through physical changes, sudden changes in clothing and/or food style, giving up previous habits, adopting new customs, or breaking emotional ties with previous social circles (Schmid, 2016), can constitute early signals or indicators of the stages of radicalization.

Another approach in the light of which radicalization was conceptualized involves filtering the levels at which it operates (micro, mezzo, and macro) (Schmid, 2013). Thus, some authors considered that "radicalization can be understood as the process by which an individual, a group, or a mass of people undergoes a transformation from participating in the political process through legal means to using or supporting violence for political purposes" (Crosset&Spitaletta, 2010), observing in this case both the variety of radicalization methods (individual or coordinated) as well as the complexity of the impact of the social side regarding the initiation of the radicalization process. Another category of authors preferred to describe it through the lens of the micro level, in the sense that "radicalization involves a personal process in which individuals adopt extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations that justify the use of indiscriminate violence" (Wilner&Dubouloz, 2010) or a "mental and psychological process that stimulates a person to take violent actions" (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2009) and is characterized by the "extremity of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify violence and sacrifice in defense of group goals" (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008).

Considering that the objectives of this research focus on the religious typology of radicalization, respectively Islamic radicalization corroborated with the Islamic ideology (Chifu *et al*, 2012), it should be mentioned that the specific of this pattern is understood as the process of joining the Global Jihad triggered by the desire for social belonging to an Islamist group, characterized by the progressive social isolation of non-believers, that is, people who belong to other religions or moderate Islam (Taarnby, 2005) or the process of incorporating Islamic fundamentalism that promotes hatred towards any entity that tries to undermine Islam (Mandel, 2012), the exercise of violence against apostates and non-believers with the aim of imposing Sharia globally (Matusitz, 2022).

Related to the conceptual elements identified previously, the proposed definition for Islamic radicalization is the following: *the psychological and social process developed at an individual level and inspired by the dynamics of a social group or a community or coordinated by a terrorist organization in order to incorporate, adhere to and disseminate a radical ideology based on Islamic fundamentalism, which legitimizes Jihad and promotes the use of violent means to quantify political-religious goals aimed at achieving a political, social or religious change contrary to democratic values or original authority, by imposing Sharia, cultivating hatred towards infidels or apostates and establishing a Global Caliphate.*

2. Research Trends in Islamic Radicalization

Radicalization is explained through several theories of influence in the psychological, social, political, or economic fields (Schmid, 2013). Therefore, in order to quantify the research objectives, the following theories were considered relevant for understanding the manifestation of radicalization, in the sense that, starting from the theoretical stage, they were used in de-radicalization or disengagement programs by practitioners (Demant et al., 2008; Horgan& Braddock, 2010). Another important aspect to mention is the fact that the trends regarding radicalization research were identified both from the constructivist approach, analyzing radicalization from the perspective of the theory of social movements and social factors, but also from the perspective of rationalism, characterizing radicalization as a process influenced by the cognitive predisposition of the individual (Schuurman, Taylor, 2018) and psychological factors.

However, over time, theories explaining the causes and factors that trigger radicalization have been refined to include the socio-psychological dimension in a complex manner (Wali, 2017), as well as references to macro-factors (cultural, economic, and demographic) that can influence the individual's choice (Gurr, 1970). From the constructivist approach, the theory of social movements explains "radicalization in the sense of the mobilization potential of a social group to subvert

the social order, the formation and motivation of recruitment networks, and the intensification of the motivation to engage radicalized persons in terrorist acts" (Borum, 2011). Moreover, from the same approach, the need to belong to a community or "the identity affiliation between potential recruits with close people from the social circle that mediates the triggering of radicalization, or the involvement in a social circle, would explain the gradual adoption by an individual of norms, ideologies, and radical habits as a major impact factor" (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008). Likewise, the role of social interaction is also exploited in the case of the recruitment of people by terrorist organizations, using social incentives to enroll and indoctrinate new followers with violent ideology but also to convince them to overcome the advanced stage of radicalization by engaging in terrorist actions (Wiktorowicz, 2005).

Also, from the spectrum of social theories, theorists have tried to explain the triggering factors of radicalization, referring to the importance of kinship, personal relationships, and social circles in the consolidation of extremist ideology (Sageman, 2004) or to refine these theories in the form of explaining the need for belonging to the Islamic Ummah and the consequent creation of the dichotomy "us versus them", which determined a new wave of extremism (Al Raffie, 2013). So, radicalization is explained from the perspective of social theories as a process influenced, triggered, or amplified as a result of social interaction or the dynamics of a group in relation to individual development, or understood at the macro level in relation to cultural and civilizational impact. Likewise, the ideological views can be intensified within the interaction with a social group by virtue of collective identity (Simon, Klandermans, 2001).

Starting from the social theories that explain radicalization in the form of factors at the macro level, the theory of economic deprivation is highlighted in the sense in which the policies of the West and the social and economic inadequacies (Murshed, Tadjoeddin, 2009) of Muslim immigrants can influence the initiation of the radicalization process, a fact that accentuates the perceptions of unfair and unjust treatment applied to the Muslim community (Molix, Nichols, 2012). However, according to this theory, the perception of injustice that some Muslim people feel can play a crucial role in triggering Islamist militancy by virtue of justifying Jihad in order to protect the collective religious identity (Syed Mansoob Murshed&Pavan, 2011). However, this theory presents a partial applicability in the context in which, although, on one hand, it explains the motivation for which some of the Muslim people belonging to a regional, cultural, and religious identity sphere may have to adhere to Islamic militancy, on the other hand, it does not cover the motivation that people belonging to other regional spheres or religious and cultural identities, such as European or Asian, feel as a starting point for the justification of Jihad.

This conceptual gap was initially covered by the theory of conversion models, which contributed to the understanding of the reasons and the way of Islamic radicalization chosen by people who initially do not share or know the moderate

Islamic religion (Galonnier, 2022). Later, this theory was interpreted in the form of conceptualizing radicalization as a sub-pattern of religious conversion. Thus, just as a process of religious conversion naturally operates, Islamic radicalization can similarly operate by replacing the adoption of a moderate religious belief system with a radical, fundamentalist one (Van den Elzen, 2018).

This theory is shared by theorists from the perspective of understanding radicalization as a sub-pattern of religious conversion, a process that automatically involves psychological and social factors but underlines progress in understanding the phenomenon compared to controversial theories of religious conversion models (Galonnier, 2022). An additional argument in support of this theory lies in the fact that, "while conversion to Islam in the moderate sense does not trigger the radicalization process, neither does the radical adoption of radical beliefs without knowledge of moderate Islam or distorted knowledge of moderate faith in following the conversion to Islam initiate affiliation with fundamentalist ideological elements, even at a time much later than the moment of conversion" (Drăgan, 2023).

Moreover, radicalization has also been explained from the perspective of psychological theories (Post, 2007), on the one hand, in the form of the individual's pathological predisposition or the existence of personal vulnerabilities and triggers (Arena & Arrigo, 2006), which intensified at the moment of an identity crisis in the subject's life prior to the radicalization process. On the other hand, the need for meaning and mission in life is often attributed to the goals promoted by extremist ideology. Thus, through the theory of the search for personal meaning, the pattern of radicalization involves three crucial components: motivational, namely the search for significance, which defines the purpose for which the person commits; the ideological component, which justifies and presents the means of violence necessary to quantify the jihadist objectives; and the social element, of group dynamics through which the individual shares and implements ideology as a means of gaining meaning (Kruglanski et al., 2014).

Concomitantly, at the theoretical level, a conceptual problem still exists in the form of understanding the role of ideology in the radicalization process, in the context where most theorists have rejected a purely ideological motivation for understanding the causes that lead to radicalization (Aly and Striegher, 2012). In this sense, some of the theorists preferred to explain the role of ideology as an intermediary to advance the process in the form of socialization in a community or group to strengthen the objectives or as a means of justifying the goals, behaviors, or beliefs assumed within the community. Another category of theorists focused on explaining radicalization by combining the psychological side, namely the personality traits of the subjects that allow adherence to a radical ideology, following the need for rigid order, regularity, exacerbated conservatism, or restructuring of a lost conformity of society (Hertog, 2019). Definitively, the extremist ideology

provides the framework for the need to reform the social order, the tendencies to reject democratic values, or the anti-Western narrative (Halverson & Way, 2012, p. 145). However, despite these clarifications regarding the implications of extremist ideology, it should be highlighted that radicalization at the cognitive level, which operates in principle as a result of the incorporation of a new system of beliefs and ideological narratives, does not inevitably lead to behavioral radicalization, a fact that justifies the algorithm for which ideology cannot be assimilated as the main cause that would lead to employment at the action level (Kasim, 2008).

Analyzing the previously exposed research trends, it is evident that there is a need to explore and deepen a multidisciplinary dimension in studying the phenomenon of radicalization (Veldhuis&Staun, 2009), in the sense that, in order to standardize practices, it is necessary to accumulate socio-psychological interpretations and cultural interpretations, as well as contextualize the manifestation of the phenomenon related to micro, mezzo, and macro factors. Similarly, reductionist approaches regarding the explanation of the concept of radicalization tend to focus exclusively on psychological or social factors, eliminating the cultural background, or treating the causes of the phenomenon's manifestation by exacerbating theological or ideological meanings (Galonnier, 2022).

Conclusions

The present research aimed to identify, along with the conceptual elements that particularize radicalization – a previously highlighted fact – the main theoretical challenges in the light of the analysis of trends in research. What has clearly emerged is that, although most theories insist on a uni- or bi-disciplinary approach of the factors and causes of radicalization, models of de-radicalization or disengagement can show effectiveness by combining a multidisciplinary vision on the subject related to the manifestation of Islamic radicalization, including a comprehensive perspective from the prism of social, psychological factors and causes, religious impact, cultural background, etc.

At the same time, although for practitioners, studying the causes and factors that lead to radicalization can be useful from the perspective of quantifying knowledge and applying it individually in relation to the needs of disengagement and de-radicalization programs, in terms of the theoretical field, challenges remain following the attempt to build patterns. Also, the contextualization of the manifestation of the phenomenon in relation to cultural factors contributes to the deepening of knowledge in the field, in the sense that the stereotyping of a certain social category or magnifying the role of a single disciplinary dimension (psychological, sociological, economic, or cultural) represent the main pitfalls in dealing with the subject of radicalization.

Also, in defining Islamic radicalization, another challenge lies in the need to segment and individualize the target groups on which the research studies are carried out in strong correlation with cultural background and religious identity.

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