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RISING EXTREMISM IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE ARAB SPRING

Abstract

The roots of the Arab Spring originate from the global economic crisis which peaked in 2008. What seemed as a people's secularist revolution quickly spread across the countries of North Africa and Middle East (so called MENA region). Various Islamist factions few years after the beginning of the Arab Spring managed to "kidnap" the revolution and turn it into a religious conflict in order to establish a society based on the Sharia law. The main goal of this paper is to analyze the relations between the Arab Spring as a people's revolution and rising religious extremism as its outcome. In the first part we try to establish theoretical framework of terms such are Salafism and extremism, their origin and their manifestation in a society. In the following section we analyze the main factors causing the failure of the Arab Spring. In that manner Egypt and Tunisia have been chosen as study cases in order to present the spectrum of religious, social and political changes that had been induced by the Arab Spring.

Key words: *the Arab Spring, Extremism, Islamist Fundamentalism, Jihadism, Salafism.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Last two decades of the twentieth century marked a significant rise of Islamist extremism which began with the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. Establishing Al Qaeda and the Mujahedeen allowed many extremists and radicals to justify their cause by joining these radical groups, these were also the initial steps of the global terrorism where national borders couldn't limit the scope and the range of this new phenomena. Numerous factors had contributed to the rise of extremism including search for identity and recognition, opposing secularism and national ideologies, overall frustration, weak educational systems and so on.[2] One of the main factors which induces extremism (then and now) are the war-torn countries like Somalia, Afghanistan and now Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen; the power vacuum that has been left in these states is quickly being filled by a non-state/paramilitary extremist organizations that can further develop their agenda transforming the region or territory in something similar to a breeding ground for Jihadists and extremists.

Many scholars have argued that the true roots of the Arab Spring which began in 2011 are not only social and political in nature, rather they were produced in economy and global economic crisis which peaked in 2008, this can also explain why some countries of MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) still struggle to establish a normal and healthy economic system. Though economic factors may have contributed, especially socio-economic aspirations and the opportunities which some governments haven't been able to deliver, to the rise of the Arab Spring the core of the revolution is represented in political, social and ethno-religious struggle whose intensity heavily varies from one country to another. [3] This is not the first time that the region has encountered transitional currents of Islamism and Arab nationalism, however it is definitely the most important one for a couple of reasons. Firstly the Arab Spring is not an isolated movement or protest that's occurring in one country, rather it is a revolutionary wave spreading far beyond MENA region that can cause serious consequences on Europe, Sahel and even in Central Asia and Caucasus. Secondly, the Arab Spring did start as a "people's revolution" but it was quickly "hijacked" by extremist factors, also interests of regional as well as global powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, the USA and Russia managed to exploit and lay foundation for a long and bloody

2 Wehler-Schoeck Anja, Foreword, *The Rise of Religious Radicalism in the Arab World: Significance, Implications and Counter-Strategies*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Amman, 2015, p. 8.
3 Rougier Eric, "`Fire in Cairo`: Authoritarian–Redistributive Social Contracts, Structural Change, and the Arab Spring", *World Development*, Vol. 78, 2016, p. 148.

proxy war. Lastly, the perpetual chaos now present in Libya, Syria and Yemen is fueling other armed groups which are not exclusively Jihadist, terrorist or radical organizations. Nevertheless these groups are showing an immense appetite towards violence, robbery and overall banditry which leads them to cooperation with other extremist groups.

What started as the Arab Spring quickly turned into "Al Qaeda Spring".[4] In this essay I will try to tackle the problem of rising Jihadism and extremism as a direct consequence of the failed revolution. The plague of violent Islamist extremism is quickly devouring countries like Libya, Syria and Iraq but it is also leaving a heavy mark on countries like Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Jordan that haven't suffered a total social and structural collapse.

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4 Rumman Mohammad Abu, "Is It `Al Qaeda Spring?`", In *The Rise of Religious Radicalism in the Arab World: Significance, Implications and Counter-Strategies*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Amman, 2015, p. 9.

2. EXTREMISM – A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Extremism in a colloquial term usually signifies a behavior that is excessive, intolerable, hardly tenable, something unusual and rarely seen. Before we dwell any further into this term and its propagation after the Arab Spring we should analyze the true meaning of the word "extremism" and its roots. A root of this word comes from the Latin word *extremus* which again determines something that is extreme and on the borders of sustainable and admissible, though this word has kept its significance throughout the ages in today's society it also has a much wider spectrum of meaning. Going for the extremes or testing your limits is not something that is initially bad, every living creature has some primordial drive to test its physical and mental capabilities in order to establish its own identity and sometimes this will take them to the final frontier. This is perfectly acceptable as long as it doesn't harm others or somehow destroys the environment which determines our living space, *ergo* extremism can be tolerable as long as it is a marginal phenomena in a society. Also, it is of great importance that we treat extremism as a phenomena in time not only as a phenomena in space, something that is extreme today doesn't necessarily mean that it will be extreme tomorrow. This can be also seen in human societies, something that is deemed as an extreme in one society can be perfectly acceptable in another one. However, no extreme state of mind (or body) can be permanent, individual nor the society can properly function if they are in a constant state of the extreme and as the time goes by this "condition of the extreme" will cause consequences which are harmful and dangerous for further development of that individual or society.[5] A rather simple definition of extremism has been offered by Peter Coleman and Andrea Bartoli: "activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary".[6]

In a contemporary society extremism needs a monolithic identity in order to function properly, this identity can be religious, racial, national or any other which gives a sense of purpose and belonging. Various extremist groups are using this identity in order to lure individuals, sense of belonging can be very important to some people in ever-changing modern society (identifying themselves to a group makes their personalities feel more secure and stronger). Extremist groups

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5 Simeunović Dragan, *Terorizam*, Pravni fakultet, Beograd, 2009, pp. 146-147.
6 Coleman Peter T. and Bartoli Andrea, according to Schmid Alex P., *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*, ICCT Research Paper, May 2014. p.11. (https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014.pdf accessed 19.11.2016)

also require from their members to have pure identities, any type of mixture for example mixed marriages are deemed as unlawful and impure. Furthermore extremist groups have an immense hatred towards defection, any kind of defection is treated as a treason towards the race, the religion, the nation or whichever identity the group had chosen to follow. According to D. Simeunović defection and treason are transformed into some kind of myth which these groups utilize in order to solidify their ranks.[7]

Extremism can also be defined by the things that it rejects as Uwe Backes, a German political scientist, suggests:[8]

- Any form of pluralism (decisions are made solely on dominant individual or group);

- Orientation towards a common good of all people no matter their orientation religious, political or any other;

- Legal rules to which all, even the leaders, must adhere;

- Self-determination.

- Also D.Simeunović in his book *Terorizam* analyses factors and traits that determine extremism, extremist behavior and forms in which it manifests itself in a society:[9]

- Exclusivity is a common trait for extremism as it is based upon inability to acquaint itself with others (cultures, nations, races etc..).

- Perpetual need to find, locate or even create enemies (even if there are none) in order to affirm its own actions or to validate its identity.

- Defensive stance, extremist groups tend to defend and emphasize their values even if they are not threatened. Strong vigilante attitude.

- Tendency for strong leadership, also extremism is more common for men than women.

- Military exhibitionism can be seen in clothes, slogans and behavior which these groups exploit in order to stand out from the crowd.

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7 Simeunović Dragan, op.cit., p. 153.
8 Uwe Backes, according to Schmid Alex P., op.cit., p. 12.
9 Simeunović Dragan, op.cit., pp. 146-159.

- Monolithic identity (racial, national, religious or any other).

- Extremism and extremist groups portray the world in black and white, there are no variations. Collective narcissism is dominant inside every extremist group.

- Compromise or any kind of remission is out of the question since it can show weakness towards the enemy.

- Constant stress and pressure are kept high inside an extremist group.

Extremism in Muslim cultures is usually expressed through Islamic fundamentalism or Islamic terrorism, but we should always keep in mind that although every terrorist is an extremist; not every extremist is necessarily a terrorist. Though religious fundamentalism has its roots in Christianity, in modern civilization religious fundamentalism is always tied to Islam and Muslim identity. Islamic fundamentalism in its base rejects any form of modern teachings and is rigidly bound to medieval thoughts, cultures and practices.[10] Salafism[11] and Wahabism[12] (a variant of Salafism) are probably the most fundamental denominations of Islam which are also the most common denominations when it comes to terrorists, radicals and extremists altogether. The Salafi movement is one of the fastest growing in Islam and it is widely accepted even in some more secular Muslim societies. Salafism represents a transnational effort for purification connecting all members through a common approach to Islam.[13] Salafism is extremely popular on the Arabian peninsula, also it has taken roots in organizations such are the Muslim Brotherhood, the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria, the Gamiyya Islamiyya in Egypt and various branches of Islamic Jihad. Saudi Arabia along with its clergy is a massive exporter of this ideology; publications, missionaries, various organizations

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10 Choudhary Lakshmi Kant, "Challenges of Islamic Fundamentalism: Problems and Possibilities", *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affaires*, Vol. 57(3), 2001, p. 7.

11 Salafists usually represent a conservative sunni Muslim population which seeks to apply literalist interpenetrations of scripture written by the Prophet and his followers.

12 Named after Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in 18th century. Wahabism is considered intolerant by the other Mulsim since it preches and practices violence and jihad against fellow Muslims or takfir (bad Muslims) and governments who don't follow the path of Quran or Sunna. (Botha Anneli, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism*. Pretoria, Tshwane: Institute for Security Studies. 2008. (https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/MONO144FULL.PDF accessed 17.11.2016)

13 Wiktorowicz Quintan, "The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 8(4), 2001, p. 20. For the concept "imagined community," see Anderson Benedict, *Imagined Communities – Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, London, New York, 1983.

(http://rebels-library.org/files/imagined_communities.pdf accessed 21.10.2016)

which are financed by Saudi Arabia create an effective tool for spreading Salafism across the Muslim world. The main cause for extremism in this ideology lies in its call for purification and rigid interpretation of Quran, this idea revolves around strict concept of "oneness of God" and rejection of human reason, logic and desire.

Salafism can be separated into three different factions such are purists, politicos and jihadists. Purists have their focus on propagation, education and purification and are strongly against Islam in politics since it encourages deviancy; politicos emphasize the need for Salafi creed to be implemented into the political arena; and finally Jihadists which have a militaristic approach and call for violence and revolution.[14] All three factions are basically fundamental and in that sense extreme, but only the last faction (the Jihadist) have a violent approach to the Salafi creed. Jihadist interpretation and implementation of the creed is used in many Islamist terrorist organizations since it can induce a sense of a higher meaning to the actions which are executed by the same radical organizations.[15] One of the main factors which separates the Salafi Jihadist factions from all others is their disinterest in politics and political participation as it is deemed unlawful and in contrast to the Allah's divine rule and *hakimiyya*. This apolitical factor is very important in order to separate Jihadist groups from other Islamist groups, despite both being fundamental at its core Jihadists openly reject politics and are orientated toward militaristic and violent approach while the other is political and it's seeking various means in order to accomplish its goals.[16] Modern structure of Jihadism as a final form of Islamic extremism originates from Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden's teachings and his *fatwas*. In the post 9/11 world Al Qaeda has become a vanguard of Jihadism in terms of ideology, principles and even logistical and operational support hub between many extremist groups. At the end of the 20th century Jihadism was mostly confined by the national borders thus limiting these extremist groups to fight only against domestic "enemy", however with the dawn of the new century Jihadism had received a new global dimension. Increased cross-border cooperation among Jihadist groups was largely influenced by the Al

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14 Wiktorowicz Quintan, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29, 2006, p. 208.

15 "When facing the character of a Jihadist we have a problem of psychological and psychoanalytical investigation of different models of violence, which are experienced as a holy mission." (Zan Bodijar, according to Alam Halid Fuad, *Džihadista iz susedstva,* Evro Book, Beograd, 2014, p. 55.)

16 Raffie Dina Al, "Whose Hearts and Minds? Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Salafi Jihadism", *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Vol. 3(2), 2012, p. 20. (http://jtr.st-andrews.ac.uk/articles/10.15664/jtr.304/ accessed 19.11.2016)

Qaeda and their reluctant narrative of "global struggle".[17] Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda became some sort of a gathering point for these types of extremists all across the globe, also it is evident in the names of other terrorist organization which are following this narrative of Jihadism such are Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Salafi Group for Call and Combat based in Algeria (GSPC).[18] We can clearly see this narrative among terrorists and extremists during and after the Arab Spring. Every terrorist organization which actively operates in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq or Yemen has this global "feature" especially in their recruit department. Many of their combatants (in some groups they are a majority) are coming from foreign countries like Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia and some African states which are providing the bulk of the entire fighting force. Osama bin Laden clearly managed to produce a global narrative that later allowed Jihadists to shift from national to a global stage of terrorism.[19] Oliver Roy, a French scholar, says that the success of Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden comes from the invention of this global narrative which allows rebels without a cause to connect with a cause, rather than trying to establish a modern Islamic political organization.[20] And this is exactly what separates Jihadists from the politicos in the Salafi doctrine/dogma.

The main issue of the Arab Spring as a failed revolution is the rise of factions, organizations and groups which are fundamental and extreme but also very violent. Terrorist organizations such are Al Qaeda, Al Shabab, Boko Haram, AQIM and most recently Islamic State propagate the same (or very similar) fundamentalist ideologies or religious views that are rooted in Jihadist Salafism. These extremists (militants) are rouge elements of the Muslim society, while being marginalized in the Arab world over a long period of time, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring their ideologies are becoming very popular. In the absence of an organized state extremist groups with ideology such as this can be rather attractive, the power vacuum that is left in many countries after the Arab Spring is quickly being filled by these extremist groups.

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17 Bartolo Romain, "Decentralised Leadership in Contemporary Jihadism: Towards a Global Social Movement", *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Vol. 2(1), 2011, p.5. (http://jtr.st-andrews.ac.uk/articles/10.15664/jtr.173/ accessed 12.11.2016)

18 In September 2006, the GSPC swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden. The GSPC became al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in January 2007 and remains the largest jihadist network in Western Europe. (Bartolo Romain, op.cit., p.6)

19 Bartolo Romain, op.cit., p.7.

20 Ibidem

3. FACTORS OF THE ARAB SPRING FAILURE

Economic hardships and democratic aspirations were one of the main reasons triggering the Arab Spring. Sadly after the revolution the same problems are still present and in some countries the situation is far worse than before. Imbalanced income, poverty, corruption and nepotism were one of the issues which led Arab people to revolt and strive towards a revolution that could potentially change their society.[21] Though the situation after the Arab Spring has shifted in almost every country, certain aspects of life which contribute towards the rise of Islamist extremism and Salafism are more present than ever before. These factors are multivariable, non-linear, psychological or social which include individual and group dynamics on both macro and micro levels. Although these circumstances may diverge on a global scale they are very similar and consistent when observing countries of the Arab Spring.

Political oppression and exclusion was very strong under many regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, Salafists and extremists exploited this situation and portrayed themselves as a form of opposition towards the government. Meanwhile moderate Islamist organizations were mostly snuffed out by the strong secularist regimes over the years. This resistance towards the authoritarian government has been heavily supported by radical organizations which are now present in the post-revolutionary Arab society. Fighting the oppressive regimes these groups have managed to gain legitimacy and support across all levels of society despite providing space for the proliferation of Jihad.

Social exclusion, youth marginalization and worsened economic situation is favoring extremist groups and their agendas in post-revolutionary societies. North-African youth was largely excluded from any kind of political process or decision making, furthermore political parties after the Arab Spring have failed to recognize the youth's potential in the making of the revolution and their future place in the society. Failed plans to attract and implement the youth into the structure of the new society attracted Salafist groups who offered identity, subculture and even inspirational opportunity for the younger generations. Weak economic conditions, high unemployment and very limited opportunities among students and younger generations represents a systematic problem which can lead to further radicalization.

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21 Cinar Sertan, Gocer Ismet, "The Reasons and Economic and Political Consequences of Arab Spring", *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol 17(2), 2014, pp. 39-49.

After the governmental change many political prisoners have been released or pardoned by the newly elected regimes, however many of these political prisoners were Salafists or former Afghan Mujahedeen imprisoned for their actions or affiliations with various terrorist organizations. Newly elected governments were rather liberal when it came to pardoning these extremists in order to gain favor from the masses. Many of these former combatants have a bloody history and a vast Jihad experience which can be used for further proliferation of extremism in the region. Another important factor also includes foreign military interventions which are now present in the whole MENA region. As foreign powers try to quell disorder in Libya, Iraq and Syria extremists and jihadists from those countries usually just change location and "spill-over" to Egypt, Tunisia or Algeria. Inaccessible terrain and porous borders are exploited by the extremists as illegal migration, trafficking and smuggling routes. Finally religious places as Masques, which were controlled by the secularist governments, after the revolution are more or less without any governmental control. Masques play a critical role in spreading Salafism, these places offer radicals an easy way to impose their extremist views on others without any kind of control or supervision. [22]

3.1   THE CASE OF EGYPT

The Arab Spring in Egypt can be viewed as a three stage revolution which began in the January of 2011, starting with the resignation of the Mubarak's government, election of the Muslim Brotherhood and finally ousting the Brotherhood and implementing a semi-authoritarian military regime led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi a former high-ranking military commander. Throughout these stages various forms of extremist groups have emerged or consolidated taking advantage of the turmoil in the country as well as in the region. Extremist groups in Egypt can be classified based on the region and territory in which they operate and their affiliation towards other global terrorist networks. Three broad categories can be observed in the Egyptian extremist pattern: Sinai-based Jihadists affiliated with the Islamic State, mainland Salafi Jihadists (mostly affiliated with the Al Qaeda) and non-Salafi Jihadist groups made from Islamist supporters and former members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The last category is usually treated as amateurs with low or no combat experience who are mostly anarchic, unlike first two categories who

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22 Uhlmann Janette, *Jihadism in the Maghreb A Threat Assessment*, Recherches & Documents, N° 06/2015, pp. 9-12. (https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/recherches-documents/web/documents/2015/201506.pdf accessed 12.10.2016)

are actively trying to associate themselves to other global and regional terrorist networks in order to secure their foothold in Egypt.[23] Before the Arab Spring Egypt's extremist spectrum was primarily focused on the Muslim Brotherhood[24] (Al-Ihkwan al-Muslimun), Islamic Group[25] (al-jama'a al-islamiyya) and Egyptian Islamic Jihad[26] (jama'at al-jihad bi-misr).[27] However, after the initial and the second stage of the Arab Spring in Egypt new extremist groups began their ascendency. One of the first was Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis[28] formed in July in 2012, it is believed that the group has strong ties towards Al Qaeda but also Islamic State (one of the leaders of the group pledged its allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). The group's activities are mainly local while strictly following the Salafi Jihadist rhetoric, one of the main goals is of course to establish some kind of Islamic state in Egypt while the long term strategy is the final liberation of Jerusalem. Like all Salafi Jihadist groups ABM has little or no interests in politics and the fall of Morsi's government further justified their stance towards democracy and Egypt's revolution. Ranks of the group are mostly filled by Bedouin tribes of the Sinai but influx of other Jihadists from the region can be expected since the group pledged its allegiance to Islamic State in November 2014. Tactics of the group are focused on suicide bombers, assassinations, kidnapping, deploying IED (improvised explosive device) and occasional larger scale operations using light infantry tactics and weapons.[29]

Several other smaller Jihadist groups have also emerged in the post Arab Spring period. In 2012 Ansar Al-Jihad (Al Qaeda in Sinai) pledged its allegiance to Zawahiri; Ajnad Misr (Soldiers of Egypt) in 2014 began their activities in the capital attacking security forces, though the group is loosely connected to the ABM

23 Awad Mokhtar, Hashem Mostafa, *Egypt's Escalating Islamist Insurgency*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015, p. 4. (http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_58_Egypt_Awad_Hashem_final.pdf accessed 21.10.2016)

24 Originated in the twenties, fighting colonialism promoting pure Islamic teaching pan-Islamic ideology based in Cairo.

25 Active in the nineties, very violent accused of massive killings of policemen and soldiers, civilians tourists, formed in the seventies at the Asyut University.

26 Formed in the seventies by Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj former member of MB.

27 Breen Heidi, *Violent Islamism in Egypt from 1997 to 2012*, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI). 2013, pp.10-11. (http://www.ffi.no/no/publikasjoner/documents/01703.pdf accessed 12.11.2016)

28 Group of Partisans of Jerusalem, ABM.

29 Pusztai Wolfgang, *Not Only On The Sinai. Islamic Extremism In Egypt*, ISPI: Analysis No. 289, August 2015, pp. 6-8. (http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_289_pusztai__2015_0.pdf accessed 12.12.2016)

and its following the Jihadist rhetoric it is not focused on establishing a caliphate as of yet; Ansar al-Sharia fi Ard al-Kinanah and Kataib al-Furqan which have links to Islamic state and al-Quaseem Brigades in Gaza focusing on Suez Canal and Cairo. There is also an array of smaller extremist groups like Al-Takfir wa al-Hijra, Jund al-Islam, Al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya Fi Sina, Tawhid wal-Jihad etc.[30]

Since the regional situation is highly unstable the newly formed groups in Egypt will surely thrive and continue with their actions. Though the newly elected president has a vast support from the nation (especially the secular part of the nation) the government and the security sector must take appropriate steps in order to deter and stop further development of the Jihadist groups. These steps should include: avoiding punishment and retribution over the villages and population in Sinai; supporting non-extremist Islamic preachers or former Jihadist combatants who have denounced their deeds in order to reach the youth and explain the real situation; improving overall communication with the people especially in dangerous or high-risk zones (like Sinai); easing political restrictions and recognizing more political freedoms; overall improvement of parliamentary discussions, election and representation of the opposition; improving ties and working more closely with Bedouin tribes on the Sinai peninsula; overall improvements in security and intelligence sector and finally assessing the problem of a extremely porous Libya border which serves as a transit point for extremist, Jihadists, criminals, trade of illicit goods and most importantly weapons.[31]

Although the Muslim Brotherhood still represents a major player in Egypt when it comes to extremism and general Islamist fundamentalism, in recent years after the revolution external factors are becoming much more present in the country. The biggest threat of external Jihadist factor is the extreme violence, call for "apocalyptic Jihad" and total disinterest in any kind of politics; unlike the Muslim Brotherhood which despite being fundamental has always shown the will to negotiate and participate in the country's political agenda. Muslim Brotherhood over the years managed to establish a distinctive policy which differs from other Islamist extremist groups, especially those who emerged during or after the Arab Spring. Comparing the Brotherhood to these newly founded groups we can see that extremism (as I stated in the first section of the paper) has its degrees, variables and intensity in which it can be manifested in a society.

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30 Pusztai Wolfgang, op.cit., p. 9.
31 *Egypt's Rising Security Threat* – The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2015, pp. 18-22. (https://timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Tahrir_Report_FINAL_WEB.pdf accessed 21.10.2016)

3.2 THE CASE OF TUNISIA

The Tunisian upheaval in 2011, which started the Arab Spring, brought an end to a five-decade long authoritarian rule of Habib Bourguiba and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. The constitutionalisation of a new and rather fragile democracy in the country was led by a coalition government composed out of Ennahda (dominant Tunisian Islamic party) and two other centre-leftist groups Ettakatol and the Congrès Pour la République. Despite the evident progress in terms of political freedoms, civil rights, parliamentary elections and overall democracy the lack of a strong regime allowed certain Islamist extremist groups to consolidate and spread their influence across the country, especially targeting the Tunisian youth. Main factors which further contributed to the growth of extremism in the country also include: 1) Divisions between secular and religious communities, though Tunisia is a very secular country after the regime change there has been a clear surge towards Islamism or more radical variations of it; 2) Socio-economic factors that include slow economic growth, low foreign investments and overall unemployment are becoming present not only in Tunisia but in other Arab countries of MENA region as well; 3) Growing Islamist radicalization is encouraged by poor economic conditions in the country, furthermore after the fall of Ben Ali's regime the new government released many Islamists which were imprisoned back then (many of them are heavily influenced by the Saudi Wahhabism); 4) Youth marginalization is also indentified as one of the most concerning factors of Tunisian rising Salafism problem, in fact the younger generations which began the revolution are now neglected by the government and left in an undesirable economic situation (many are feeling betrayed or deceived); 5) Strong economic disparities between developed coastal regions and underdeveloped interior regions, in Tunisia as well as in Libya sharp differences in the economy and regional development in the country are creating small towns which act as a support hubs for recruitment, training and indoctrination of various kinds of fundamentalists, extremists and future terrorists.[32]

Tunisian Salafism dates back to the eighties, however modern trend of Salafism which is present in today's Tunisian society is a buy-product of a semi-successful revolution combined with a lower standard of living and disenfranchised youth. Former Tunisian Salafists where usually classified as non-violent personas who even rejected political participation since it was deemed as a distraction from the rule of God. This apolitical stance of Tunisian Salafists, focusing on the spiritual rather than material, allowed them to exist throughout the Ben Ali's regime.

32 Hinds Roisin, *Conflict analysis of Tunisia*, GSDRC, University of Birmingham, UK, 2014, p. 4.

However, after the fall of the regime Ennahda as a major political factor tried to reach out to the Salafists and integrate them into the political sphere of life. The party was actively encouraging Salafi groups to participate in politics, form political parties but also to restrain themselves from using any kind of violence.[33] Despite the good intentions of the newly elected government, the extremists quickly exploited the security vacuum in the aftermath of the revolution in order to spread their influence and consolidate their place in the public sphere of life. The passive stance of the new government, heavy influx of refugees from Libya, poor security measures in critical areas and small towns such are Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba, Kairouan, and Kasserine allowed Jihadists to establish smuggler routes, recruit centers and even justify their actions by promoting charity and humanitarian work in poverty-stricken areas.[34]

After the initial uprising two major Salafists groups have emerged, Ansar al Sharia (AST) and Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade. Ansar al Sharia represents the most organized and largest Salafists group in Tunisia which focuses on preaching and spreading the Jihadi ideology, while Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade represents a group of underground fighters who emerge periodically to attack public institutions, government officials and security forces implementing standard guerrilla and terrorist tactics, in that way the latter is much more closer to a conventional terrorist group rather than an extremist Salafist organization. Both of these types of Salafi-Jihadi groups (violent and non-violent) represent a threat to the Tunisian government and its transition to the democratic system. However, the focus shall remain on Ansar Al Sharia since the spectrum of religious and fundamentalist work of this group is much more far-reaching and has stronger implications towards further radicalization of the society and its youth.[35] AST structure can be seen in three different generations of Tunisian Jihadists: generation of Jihadists who joined Al Qaeda in the nineties, second generation of Tunisians who fought the American invasion of Iraq and lastly the younger generations who stepped up after the Arab Spring in 2011. This amalgam of different generations is very important in order to understand different aspects of Salafist ideology and how it influences the group. Though many are

33 Koch Rebecca, *Islam and Politics in Tunisia*, Paris School of Internal Affairs, 2014, p. 9. (http://www.sciencespo.fr/psia/sites/sciencespo.fr.psia/files/KOCH_Rebecca.pdf accessed 17.10.2016)
34 Fahmi Georges, Meddeb Hamza, *Market for Jihad Radicalization in Tunisia*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015, p. 5. (http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_55_FahmiMeddeb_Tunisia_final_oct.pdf accessed 21.10.2016)
35 Malka Haim, *Tunisia: Confronting Extremism*, pp. 92-93. (https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/141215_Chapter4_Malka_ReligiousRadicalism.pdf accessed 18.11.2016)

trying to portray AST as a group which is trying to establish an Islamic State by violent means, after the Arab spring the focus of the group has shifted towards preaching religious Salafist ideology in order to complete the task. This evolution from violent to non-violent approach is actually preparing the society for the rule of Islam through religious and social activities rather than fighting.[36] This implies a question, why is the movement dangerous and what are the consequences on the Tunisian society? Though the group is trying to represent itself as a non-violent actor, the scope and the range of the group and its members are too vast to control. Many of the AST older members have a history of Jihadism in Iraq, Afghanistan and lately in Syria and Libya, also parts of the group are actively supporting foreign combatants and are encouraging younger members to join their brethren in foreign countries. Religious identity is a major factor for the Salafi ideology, after decades of secularist rule the Arab Spring allowed more religious freedoms and the nation was eager to indulge it. Exploiting the dichotomy between secularism and religion or conservativism and modernism in a fragile post-revolutionary society, Salafist groups are trying to impose their religious views on others as an imperative. AST was essential for the post-revolutionary Salafi movement in Tunisia, their social outreach and engagement allowed them to implement their ideology and rhetoric quickly into the public sphere of life. Like other Islamist extremist groups in the region they rapidly filled the vacuum left by the elites in the early stages of post-revolutionary process and offered a reliable alternative to the younger generations which are more prone to radicalization. [37]

4.   CONCLUSION REMARKS

Islamist extremism and Salafism symbolizes one of the major security threats and occupies a pivotal place in the international security framework. The scale of the threat is global because Islam is the second largest religion in the world with suitable proliferation potential.[38] Re-Islamization of secular societies confronted with the Arab Spring led to a rising surge of radicalization as a response to a half a century long authoritarian/secularist rule. Arab states that have gone through a

36 Fahmi Georges, Meddeb Hamza, op.cit., pp. 7-8.
37 Petré Christine, *Tunisian Salafism: The rise and fall of Ansar al-Sharia*, Policy Brief, N° 209 - October 2015, p. 5. (http://fride.org/download/PB209_Tunisian_Salafism.pdf accessed 18.11.2016)
38 Choudhary Lakshmi Kant, *Challenges Of Islamic Fundamentalism: Problems And Possibilities*, Emerald Group Publishing, 2008, p. 15. (http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/097492840105700301?journalCode=iqqa accesed 19.11.2016.)

transitional process during the Arab Spring are still facing structural, security and economic issues which cannot be resolved in a short period of time. These issues vary in scope and intensity depending on countries and their post-revolutionary situation. Nevertheless the array of problems or factors is very similar across the MENA region. Identity crisis in these former secularist states is followed by a political transition in which many different Islamist factions are trying to converge on this point and ultimately profit from it. Tunisia's Ennahda party and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood have been able to attract support far beyond their respective bases because they looked like credible parties for government. However when entering a political sphere of life these Salafi parties will face certain constraints and limitations, establishing *sharia* law or Islamic State will face resistance in these new democratic societies.[39] On the other hand the towering pressure of insecurity, worsened standard of living and general discontentment in Arab countries are pushing people to seek solutions in more radical places. Major Salafists or fundamentalist organizations like Ennahda or Muslim Brotherhood are not part of the problem, moreover they can represent a solution or exit for the violent Jihadism. These groups can consolidate or accommodate younger generations, dislodge their ideas of "holy war" and integrate them into the society. Even though Salafism is an extreme stance and propagates fundamentalism it cannot be eradicated from the Arab world and especially not after the revolution and changes that have been set in motion. Focus should be on integration and propagation of non-violent Salafism, weather its political or spiritual (purists), while discouraging Jihadism that ultimately leads to terrorism. Sadly the situation in the region doesn't favor peaceful options at the moment. Further deterioration of some Arab societies will inevitably lead to escalation and rise of Islamist extremism in which Salafism will be the main propellant for auxiliary radicalization of a society.

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USPON EKSTREMIZMA NAKON ARAPSKOG PROLEĆA

Apstrakt

Koreni Arapskog proleća leže u globalnoj ekonomskoj krizi koja je dostigla svoj vrhunac 2008. godine. Zemlje Severne Afrike i Bliskog Istoka (tzv. MENA region) ubrzo su bile zahvaćene revolucijom koja je na prvi pogled izgledala kao narodna i u osnovi sekularna revolucija. Nekoliko godina nakon početka Arapskog proleća različite islamističke frakcije uspele su da "kidnapuju" revoluciju i pretvore je u svojevrsni verski rat radi uspostavljanja društva koje se zasniva na Šerijatskom pravu. Glavni cilj ovog rada je analiza odnosa između Arapskog proleća kao narodne revolucije i narastajućeg verskog ekstremizma kao njegovog ishoda. U prvom delu pokušaćemo da uspostavimo teorijski okvir pojmova kao što su Salafizam i ekstremizam, njihovo poreklo i njihova manifestacija u društvu. U sledećem delu biće analizirani glavni faktori koji su prouzrokovali propast Arapskog proleća. U tom cilju Egipat i Tunis su izabrani kao slučajevi za istraživanje radi objašnjenja spektra verskih, socijalnih i političkih promena koje su bile uzrokovane Arapskim prolećem.

Ključne reči*: Arapsko proleće, ekstremizam, islamistički fundamentalizam, džihadizam, salafizam.*