

Book Review: Islamist Radicalisation in Europe and the Middle East: Reassessing the Causes of Terrorism

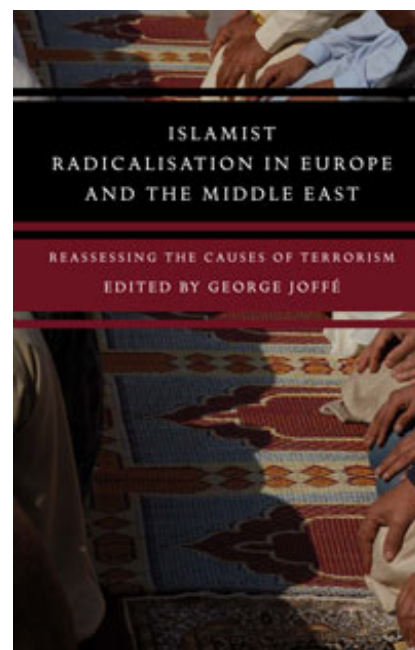
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*Are today's radicals tomorrow's extremists? Most analyses of violence emanating from the Middle East or from Europe's Muslim communities tend to assume that this is the case. This edited collection seeks to look beyond assumptions about violence in the Middle East through an examination of specific contexts of radicalism and by asking how conditions for radicalisation are created. **Kenneth Martin** concludes that the book offers new and engaging findings for all readers.*

Islamist Radicalisation in Europe and the Middle East: Reassessing the Causes of Terrorism. George Joffé (ed.). IB Tauris. November 2012.

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Islamist Radicalisation in Europe and the Middle East: Reassessing the Causes of Terrorism, edited by [George Joffé](#), arises out of a conference on the subject from 2009. As an edited volume built around a theme rather than a specific case, the book shifts focus fairly dramatically between chapters and authors, who range from academics on both sides of the Atlantic to military consultants. Accordingly, the chapters themselves also range from deep case studies to theoretical discussions of radicalism and radicalisation. The volume distinguishes itself by adding both in-depth case studies off the beaten track and new approaches to the study of Islamic radicalisation. The depth of analysis many of the authors are able to reach is worthy of specific note, as the volume includes a chapter entirely devoted to the city of Tripoli's history of radicalisation, discussions of how literature has influenced individual influential Islamic radicals, and strategies for reforming educational programmes to counter radicalisation.



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Two chapters are worthy of specific mention. 'Sowing Dragons' Teeth' by James Spencer traces the political deployment of the term 'radical' in Iraq post-2003, and contests the standard narrative of how radicalisation progressed in Iraq. When Spencer points to the "rational motives" grounded in local politics of those who were often dismissed as 'radicals', his background as a consultant who served with British forces in Iraq certainly adds a weighty voice to the process of understanding that debated conflict. Rational political and economic motivations for violence are discussed, and notions that the Iraqi insurgency was driven either by former regime elements seeking a return of Saddam or by transnational jihadists attempting to recreate the Caliphate are severely attacked. The piece thrives on deconstructing – in a clear and direct style – the deployment and usage of the term 'radical' to cover up complex processes that do not fit into simple narratives, and should serve as a warning against the dangerous tendency in counter-insurgency and government writ large to paint all 'radicals' with the same brush.

'Thinking Centrifugal' by Johnny Ryan is a refreshing piece which straddles policy and theory, and considers the implications of the Internet on social expression. Ryan's chapter represents a well thought-out work, arresting cries of alarm on the Internet being a forum of increasing radicalisation of its users. The chapter's historically grounded discussion of the process of peer-review as an often overlooked online mechanism working towards moderation is fascinating in itself. The depth of historical detail is particularly remarkable, as this is a rarely discussed area of the growth of knowledge. However, in its implication for an open, online society working against radicalisation and debunking myths of the radicalisation of the internet, it is a timely discussion sure to provoke new ideas.

While this depth – by authors who clearly both know their field and in some cases have also clearly lived it – is a refreshing change from mainstream academic terrorism studies who typically aim for broad theoretical sweeping gestures, the book's main strength is unfortunately also its main weakness. The Introduction attempts to weave all the disparate chapters into a coherent attempt to "reassess the causes" and processes of radicalisation and terrorism, but each author's focus is often widely separated from the previous chapter, so much so that it is on occasion quite jarring. Single country case studies follow sweeping works on the critical theory of securitisation and radicalisation, and while attempts have clearly been made by the editors to create thematic sections, only so much could be done given the continuum represented. The volume itself is therefore useful to many different audiences, but perhaps only a chapter or two within it is actually worthwhile, depending on one's interest. Most chapters are only related to each other by the broad topical discussion of 'radicalisation', a general tendency towards revisionist critique, and not much else.

Furthermore, the volume itself seems to have been published at what may be regarded as simply an unlucky time for its subject material – while some of the chapters attempt to discuss the recent unrest in the Middle East, the overall book itself is sadly lacking in relating its discussions to the burning question on every reader's mind – "How did this case affect the Arab Spring?". The Introduction notably does acknowledge this point, and devotes most of its length and analysis to an attempt to tie together the various themes and arguments of the book into tentative conclusions on what is of course a complex and ongoing process of social, political, religious and violent reform across many states. In no way is it the fault of the authors' that their chapters would suddenly acquire such pressing relevance; however, we are sadly left to our own devices when attempting to specifically relate each chapter to the most important case where studies of radicalisation would be most useful.

While suffering from a certain lack of thematic unity, *Islamist Radicalisation* is overall an excellent addition, and often revision, to the study of radicalisation and terrorism more broadly. Almost any reader, whether academic, practitioner, or the informed general reader, will find something new and engaging here. There are important theoretical and policy implications throughout the entire volume, especially in regards to the ongoing upheaval in the Middle East. Much of the theoretical work is aimed at overturning established thought on terrorism and radicalisation – against monocausal accounts aimed at religion as the primary cause of Islamic radicalisation – and usefully complicates and grounds in deep case studies what must be a complex understanding of a difficult cross-cutting subject.

Kenneth Martin is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at Concordia University, in Montreal, Canada, focusing on non-state armed groups, South Asia, and the contestation and construction of the state. He is also a Fellow of the US Army's Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, and a serving Canadian Forces infantry officer. [Read reviews by Kenneth.](#)