

Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Forever on Trial: Islam and the Charge of Violence

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Introduction¹

The demonization of Islam and Muslims has frequently centered around the accusation that Islam is inherently violent and that Muslims are dangerous. This narrative has gained such fervor that the term ‘terrorism’ is almost exclusively reserved for violent acts perpetrated by Muslims (whether acts of terror or resistance), and the perceived ‘threat’ of Islam has now become the pretext for devaluing and abusing Muslim life. This has directly enabled anti-Muslim persecution, violent occupation, brutalization and massacres.

The infamous new atheist and career Islamophobe Sam Harris appeared 75 days into the 2023-2024 Gazan genocide to explain that “the vast majority of Muslims are deranged” and “have a tendency to erupt with psychopathic rage”.² This was ostensibly offered as a justification for the Israeli army’s mass slaughter of tens of thousands of innocent Palestinian Muslim men, women and children. Islamophobic tropes are also being weaponised to de-legitimise politicians and academics who criticize Western foreign policy or exhibit even a fraction of pro-Palestinian sentiment.³ The image of Islam and Muslims as violent has deliberately been perpetuated in the West to justify its unconditional support for the Israeli occupation and the innumerable human rights violations it enacts, in addition to its own military invasions and mass bombardments of Muslim countries. In 30 years, the US has invaded, bombed, or occupied 14 Muslim countries.⁴ The total death toll of the US-led post-9/11 wars is estimated as high as 4.7 million, along with 7.6 million children under the age of 5 in post-9/11 war zones suffering from acute

¹ This paper was initially written in 2016 in the context of the rise of ISIS, however it has since been updated to provide a more comprehensive discussion. The author would like to thank Anna Birawi for her contributions in assisting with updating the article.

² Interview with Piers Morgan, *TalkTV*, December 2023.

³ For more detail, see Sahar Aziz, “Presumptively Antisemitic: Islamophobic Tropes in the Palestine Israel Discourse,” Center for Security, Race and Rights, (Rutgers University Law School, 2023).

⁴<https://theintercept.com/2014/11/06/many-countries-islamic-world-u-s-bombed-occupied-since-1980/> and <https://www.stopwar.org.uk/article/why-has-the-us-invaded-occupied-or-bombed-14-muslim-countries-in-30-years/>

malnutrition.⁵ Muslims are not afforded the same human rights as their non-Muslim counterparts because of the alleged violent threat their religion poses.

This, alongside other horrors, has continued unabated with total impunity, in part because of the campaign of rhetoric that dehumanizes Muslims and demonizes Islam as a force that needs to be subdued. The Islamophobia industry has therefore served a vital role in fueling violence against Muslims by both state and non-state actors. Many individuals have carried out hate crimes against Muslim communities in the West, with incidents continuing to rise in recent years.⁶ In October 2016, the FBI arrested a right-wing “Crusaders” militia group in Kansas that had stockpiled firearms, ammunition, and explosives with plans to launch an attack on local Muslim immigrants, believing “the only good Muslim is a dead Muslim.”⁷ In 2019, an Australian far-right extremist killed 51 Muslims worshippers in Christchurch Mosque in what came to be the deadliest mass shooting in New Zealand's history. In June 2021, 5 members of the Afzal family were brutally killed in an Islamophobic hate crime by a 20-year old white supremacist who drove his pickup truck into them on a sidewalk in London, Ontario, Canada. Justice Renee Pomerance, who presided over the trial, reasoned “He killed them because they were Muslim”⁸. Most recently, Islamophobic attacks have surged amid Israel’s genocide in Gaza starting late 2023, with CAIR reporting a “216% increase in requests for help and reported bias incidents compared to the previous year”⁹. This

⁵ Watson Institute For International And Public Affairs, “Civilians killed and wounded”, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians>

⁶ The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University recently noted that anti-Muslim hate crimes rose 89% in 2016 from the previous year, as discussed in Brian Levin, “Hate Crime in U.S. Survey Up 6 Percent; But Anti-Muslim Rise 89 Percent, NYC Up 24 Percent So Far in 2016,” *HuffPost*, October 22, 2016, updated December 6, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-levin-jd/hate-crime-in-us-survey-u_b_12600232.html.

⁷ Ryan J. Reilly and Christopher Mathias, “Right-Wing ‘Crusaders’ Militia Group Plotted Terror Attack On Muslim Immigrants, FBI Charges,” *HuffPost*, October 14, 2016, updated October 25, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/militia-terror-plot-fbi-kansas_us_58014995e4b0162c043c1e90.

⁸ “Man who intentionally drove his truck into a Muslim family, killing 4, gets life sentence in Canada,” *The Associated Press*, February 23, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/muslim-family-killed-canada-life-sentence-terrorism-021e76f863d8590965116422aed9fe71>

⁹ “CAIR received an ‘unprecedented’ 1,283 reports of anti-Arab and Islamophobic bias in the last month, new data shows,” *CNN*, November 9, 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/09/us/cair-unprecedented-surge-anti-muslim-bias-reaj/index.html>

includes the brutal and horrific murder of 6 year old Palestinian American boy Wadea al Fayoume under the deranged pretext that “Muslims should die”¹⁰.

To this day, Muslim children are being tormented in public schools on account of their faith and Muslim women are being assaulted in public for wearing the headscarf, while mosques and community centers are routinely targeted by arsonists and vandals. With every new conflict or incident involving Muslims or endorsing the name of Islam, the broader Muslim community becomes increasingly at risk of falling victim to oppressive public policy and hate crime. Many countries have introduced draconian policies to prevent ‘radicalisation’. Falling short of the mark, they indiscriminately target Muslim communities, arousing suspicion for as little as wearing the hijab or wanting to pray in school. Meanwhile, anti-Muslim rhetoric has directly continued to fuel violence against the Muslim community and serves to disinform the broader Western public of the root causes for instances of violence witnessed in the Muslim world. By focusing on an association between Islam and violence, the public narrative has failed to bring us any closer to solving the real problem of violence. For all the public noise, the media sound bites, and the ink spilled on this topic, there seems to be an incredible lack of clarity in actually addressing questions about how violent movements emerge and how they claim to draw upon either secular or religious doctrines for their justification.

The current article was initially authored in the era when ISIS was dominating western media headlines and when Muslims were constantly on the defensive, having to explain why the mainstream teachings of Islam do not accord with the actions of a violent criminal organization. Muslims were frequently asked to comment on the actions of ISIS and had to prove that Islam should not be blamed for the violent actions of a criminal organization. This paper was authored in that context to discuss four major issues: (1) the fallacy of associating religion with violence; (2) the fallacy of associating Islam, in particular, with violence; (3) the

¹⁰ “6-year-old Palestinian American boy is killed in anti-Muslim attack in Illinois, authorities say,” NBC News, October 16, 2023.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/6-year-old-boy-killed-anti-muslim-attack-illinois-police-say-rcna120543>

origins of violent movements in the Muslim world; and (4) an ideological analysis of violent movements and how their beliefs contradict mainstream Islamic teachings. Since that time however, the discourse has amplified in vigor and the proverbial mask has fallen as people become increasingly aware of the hypocrisy of Western media and Western political leadership that justifies its own violence against Muslims through constructing a discourse around “Muslim violent extremism/terrorism.” In light of this, this additional context has been added to preface the original article.

Does religion cause violence?

Headlines regarding terrorism or rampant acts of violence committed in the name of religion stimulate the popular knee-jerk reaction to triumphantly brandish such headlines as evidence for the evil of religion and the need to abolish it altogether. But what does it actually mean to say religion causes violence? Do we mean that the mere presence of any form of religious belief, expression, or practice necessitates the occurrence of violence? A moment of intelligent thought about the peaceful majority of the globe’s religious adherents discounts that possibility. Or do we mean that a religious ideology is more capable of developing murderous adherents than a militant ideology grounded in fascism, nationalism, racism, or some other *-ism*? The French Revolution, often said to have been rooted in the principles of liberalism and the Enlightenment, culminated in up to 40 thousand beheadings! By what statistical measure does one argue that a religious ideology carries greater potency for warfare than any other ideology? British colonialism killed 100 million Indians in 40 years between 1880 to 1920.¹¹ World War I, fought over nationalism, claimed the lives of 15 million¹² and World War II, fought over facism, claimed the lives of some 60-80 million.¹³ Since World War II, American imperialism has killed 12 million people in its three bloodiest wars alone,¹⁴ and the

¹¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/12/2/how-british-colonial-policy-killed-100-million-indians>

¹² Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 251.

¹³ “Source List and Detailed Death Tolls for the Primary Megadeaths of the Twentieth Century,” Necrometrics, last updated February 2011, <http://necrometrics.com/20c5m.htm>.

¹⁴ <https://www.worldfuturefund.org/Reports/Imperialism/usmurder.html>

US has instigated 81% of wars in the world.¹⁵ And what of the tremendous violence instigated by explicitly anti-religious ideologies? For instance, what does one say with respect to the anti-religious violence of the Soviet communist regime, which actively sought to eradicate religion and replace it with “scientific atheism”? Believing religion to be the “opium of the people” (per Marx) and “unutterable vileness” (per Lenin) whose abolition was necessary, the Soviet regime murdered thousands of clergymen and destroyed churches, monasteries, mosques, and religious schools in an effort to construct their envisioned utopia.¹⁶ The total bloodshed carried out under the Soviet reign was astonishing; an estimated 62 million were killed.¹⁷

This brief historical reflection should clearly illustrate that it is not the religious or secular content of an ideology that determines its potential for spawning violence. Rather, its xenophobic and totalitarian character allows it to conform to the interests of violent movements seeking to eliminate political opponents and establish territorial gains. Any ideology that entails the otherization and dehumanization of the outsider is one with inherent potential for violence.

In his essay *The Eight Stages of Genocide*, Professor Gregory Stanton of George Mason University describes the harm of dehumanization: “Denial of the humanity of others is the step that permits killing with impunity.”¹⁸ He proceeds to emphasize the importance of countering hate speech and propaganda that dehumanizes minorities and foment hostile treatment towards them. This also serves as a simple litmus test for evaluating an ideology—if it promotes vitriolic, abusive, and dehumanizing attitudes towards non-adherents then it should be opposed, and interpretations of religions that engage in such rhetoric must be duly counteracted by the mainstream followers of those religions (the sections below

¹⁵ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2345663/us-initiated-81-global-armed-conflicts-from-1945-to-2001>

¹⁶ Peter Watson, “The Bolshevik Crusade for Scientific Atheism,” in *The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014). He cites as a source Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

¹⁷ R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (Rutgers, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

¹⁸ Gregory H. Stanton, “The Eight Stages of Genocide,” Genocide Watch, 1998, <https://www.keene.edu/academics/ah/cchgs/resources/educational-handouts/the-eight-stages-of-genocide/download/>.

outline how the mainstream Muslim community rejects and repudiates the manipulation of Islam in the hands of violent movements).

Xenophobia and totalitarianism take on different forms, depending on the contexts in which they develop. Groups vying for power and resources exploit existing boundaries in society.¹⁹ When violent movements emerge in regions where there is a strong national identity, they tend to use the language of nationalism to advance their political agenda. When violence erupts in regions where there is a strong ethnic and cultural identity, militant movements espouse their xenophobia in the form of racism. It is unsurprising that in regions where there is a strongly held religious identity the rhetoric of violent movements will be framed in the phraseology of religion and will manipulate the sacred scriptures of religion in order to lend heavenly justifications to earthly exploitations.

But does this mean that the relationship between religion and violence is entirely incidental, a mere byproduct of other geopolitical factors? This also happens to be an erroneous oversimplification.

When conflict breaks out, people will rally around whatever group identity gives them the most emotional strength and the greatest sense of intra-group cohesion and solidarity²⁰—these are critical factors that explain the mobilization of people to join an armed cause. And because religion has tremendous capacity for arousing strong emotions and stimulating strong social cohesion, it is no surprise that political exploitation of religious identities has been a recurring phenomenon throughout history. It's not because the nature of religion inherently demands violence—but religious commitments necessarily evoke strong emotions with their emphasis on community, purpose, sacrifice, and truth. The arousal of strong emotions can lay fertile soil for external instrumentalization of religion by militants

¹⁹ The susceptibility of such boundaries to conflict has also been subject to research; for instance, Francesco Caselli and Wilbur John Coleman offer a model for violence and “ethnic distance,” which they define broadly to include the cumulative effect of “physical, religious, linguistic, and other cultural differences.” F. Caselli and W. J. Coleman, “On the Theory of Ethnic Conflict,” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 11 (2013): 161–92.

²⁰ For a discussion on the relevance of religion and language to intragroup cohesion, see Oromiya-Jalata Deffa, “The Impact of Homogeneity on Intra-Group Cohesion: A Macro-Level Comparison of Minority Communities in a Western Diaspora,” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 37, no. 4 (2016).

seeking to construct a totalitarian ideology. But again, it is not unique in this regard as other secular ideologies and sentiments like nationalistic, cultural, ethnic, and/or linguistic pride can be, and have been, just as easily drawn upon by violent groups. The foregoing historical discussion illustrates precisely that. The misuse of religion in the hands of nefarious criminal organizations does not necessitate discarding religion itself; the misuse of science and technological advancement has also occurred during conflicts. We don't throw out all of science because of Nazi eugenics,²¹ the Khmer Rouge's human experimentation,²² or phrenology;²³ and we shouldn't throw out religion because it happens to be a strong social identity people tend to cling to in times of conflict. It's also important to remember that not every instance of conflict involving a religious group is an instance of exploitation, xenophobia, or totalitarianism; there are instances of justifiable conflict that meet the conditions of a just war. This will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

Finally, it needs to be emphasized that this discussion does not amount to idle philosophical ruminations without practical consequences. The danger of the modern polemical fixation on religion as the ultimate cause of violence is that it does not end hatred and violence, but instead contributes to it by creating another monster—namely xenophobia towards members of religious communities. It provides no practical insight into solving complex conflicts in the world, but instead creates a toxic environment of ongoing hostile rhetoric. In order to make progress towards practical and effective solutions, it is essential that we move beyond such rhetoric and work together to break down divisions and humanize one another.

²¹ "DNA and Eugenics in Nazi Germany," The Holocaust Museum and Cohen Educational Center, <http://www.holocaustmuseumswfl.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Boxcar-Activities-for-Science.pdf>.

²² Seth Mydans, "First Khmer Rouge Trial Focuses on Torture House," *New York Times*, March 30, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/31/world/asia/31cambo.html>.

²³ James Poskett, "Django Unchained and the Racist Science of Phrenology," *Guardian* (US ed.), February 25, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2013/feb/05/django-unchained-racist-science-phrenology>.

Does Islam preach violence?

Western media capitalized on the emergence of ISIS to cast aspersions on the global community of 1.8 billion Muslims and their faith identity. Denunciations of ISIS came from every significant Muslim authority and organization, as well as imams and mosques the world over, with every imaginable form of condemnation, but unfortunately, they have largely been ignored. Because of the spotlight fallacy—whereby people neglect whatever is not constantly being highlighted by the media—the public only notices a repeated association between violent groups and the word ‘Islam,’ and never comes to hear of mainstream Muslims denouncing such groups. Nor does it ever describe in the same terms the massive campaigns of violence perpetrated against Muslims by the West.

Moreover, it has become a recurring preoccupation of media pundits and politicians to argue about whether ‘Islam’ itself is violent and whether such terrorist groups can be justifiably called ‘Islamic.’ In 2015, Graeme Wood authored an infamous essay with the Atlantic entitled “What ISIS really wants”, in which he wrote, “The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic.” Says who? Who has the most right to decide the definition of this five-letter word, ‘I-S-L-A-M’? Orientalism continues to loom in public discourse over Islam as the colonizers arrogate to themselves the right to tell Muslims what their own religion means, rather than allow the mainstream community and its scholarly voices to speak for themselves. The sole academic reference for Wood’s article, Bernard Haykel, a non-muslim academic, conceded in a February 2015 CNN interview, “I’m not a judge as to whether ISIS is a perversion or not [of Islam] . . . you have to be a Muslim and a Muslim jurist to judge that.”²⁴ Of course, this crucial point never made it into Wood’s article, much less any mention of the Muslim jurists, imams, and leaders globally who have declared ISIS to be completely un-Islamic. Whatever religious framing criminal organizations may choose to apply to their political agenda, the word ‘Islam’ means something entirely different to the 1.8 billion women, men, and children who consider themselves true representatives of

²⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBPIxZ_GPbQ

this faith community. The name on the label might be the same, but the contents of the package are totally different.

Is Islam a peaceful religion?

To mainstream Muslims, Islam represents a spiritual journey towards God by worshiping Him alone and caring for His creation (Qur'an 4:36). Muslims around the world affirm mercy and compassion (*rahmah*) as a fundamental characteristic of God Almighty (Qur'an 1:1), His Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (Qur'an 21:107), and the religion of Islam (*deen al-rahmah*). The values of Islam are represented by the abundant Qur'anic commandments to respond with peace in the face of hostility (e.g., Qur'an 25:63, 41:34), to be fair even to those who have hatred and animosity towards you (Qur'an 5:8), to fight only against those who fight you (e.g., Qur'an 2:190) and to treat with compassion and justice those who do not (Qur'an 60:8). The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provided the exemplary role model for Muslims in showing forgiveness to even those who persecuted him and his followers, teaching Muslims to “show compassion to all on earth”²⁵ and to “donate in charity to people of all faiths”²⁶. The Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provide explicit condemnation of violence. The Qur'an states:

Whoever kills a soul, it is as if he has slain all humanity (Qur'an 5:32)

Respond with peace in the face of hostility (25:63).

God commands you to treat with compassion and justice those who do not fight you (60:8).

and the Prophet ﷺ said:

²⁵ *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 4941, *Jāmi al-Tirmidhī*, no. 1924.

²⁶ *Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah*, no. 10491.

A person can only remain sound in his faith so long as he does not unlawfully shed blood.²⁷

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ established a [famous charter](#) declaring the Christian Monks of St. Catherine to be under his protection, and he established the constitution of Madinah declaring mutual support between Muslims and Jews and upholding freedom of religion for both communities.²⁸ The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ led by example and personally demonstrated the positive relations Muslims are to hold with people of all backgrounds. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ personally sponsored and established an ongoing fund to support a poor Jewish family in Madinah,²⁹ and he hosted the Christians of Najran in his mosque where they were able to perform their own prayers and religious services.³⁰ These are the words and deeds that represent the true compassionate nature of Islam in the minds of the global mainstream Muslim community. For more information on Islamic teachings relating to interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims, refer to [this article](#).³¹

So, does this mean that Muslims regard Islam as a pacifist religion? No, this would be entirely erroneous to assume or claim. For mainstream Muslims, just as for the majority of the global population, there are instances in which warfare is justified and necessary. The concept of jihad in Islam has gained much media attention alongside the War on Terror and with it, a whole host of false claims. For Muslims, jihad (lit. to endeavor, to strive) is, in part, a just war legally analogous to modern just-war theory, established as an obligation in self-defense or defense of the oppressed. It cannot be engaged for any other worldly gains or political interests. This is a major difference between the capitalist interests of modern Western

²⁷ *Sahih Bukhari*, no. 6862.

²⁸ Saïd Amir Arjomand, “The Constitution of Medina: A Sociolegal Interpretation of Muhammad’s Acts of Foundation of the ‘Umma,’” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 4 (2009): 555–75.

²⁹ Said ibn al-Musayyib narrated that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ used to regularly donate money as charity to a Jewish household, a practice that was continued by the Muslim community long after the Prophet ﷺ passed away. Abu Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam (d. 224 AH), *Kitab al-amwal* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1989), 727–28.

³⁰ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidayah wal-nihayah*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 1987), 3:56.

³¹ M. Nazir Khan, “Harmony with Humanity: Islam and Non-Muslims,” *Spiritual Perception*, January 12, 2015, <https://spiritualperception.org/islam-and-non-muslims/>.

imperialism and the moral virtue of Islamic civilization. “Middle Eastern oil has enchanted global powers and global capital since the early twentieth century,” Toby Craig Jones writes.³² Meanwhile, Islamic warfare is confined by a set of conditions which outline when resorting to it is justified, the means that may be justifiably employed during the war, and other ethical conditions that must be adhered to, like the protection of civilian lives and property. Allah says in the Qur’an, “Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress. Verily, Allah does not love transgressors” (2:190). The Islamic theory of jihad predates its western counterpart while mirroring the concepts of *jus ad bellum* (“justice to war”) and *jus in bello* (“justice in war”)³³. For a detailed analysis of the theory of just war in Islam, refer to [this article](#).³⁴

It’s important to note that many Western hegemonic powers push the narrative that an acceptable and ‘moderate’ Islam is pacifist in nature and, as such, everyone who doesn’t adhere to this ideology is a terrorist. Even by their own standards of justified war and by the very definition of ‘terror’, this is no more than a brazen hypocrisy which affords them the impunity to act upon financial and political interests rather than the value of justice. In real time, this manifests itself as unanimous support for the plight of Ukraine and their resistance fighters under a condemned Russian invasion, whilst simultaneously offering unwavering support to Israel in its ongoing genocide and illegal occupation of Palestine. Seemingly for them, the UN recognized right to resist foreign occupation isn’t founded on justice, dignity, or freedom. It simply doesn’t apply when their interests are not being served, and anyone who disobeys (usually Muslims) is fatally (and more importantly, wrongly) deemed a ‘terrorist’.

³² Toby Craig Jones, America, Oil, and War in the Middle East, *Journal of American History*, Volume 99, Issue 1, June 2012, Pages 208–218

³³ International Committee of the Red Cross, “What are *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*?” 2015. <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/what-are-jus-ad-bellum-and-jus-bello-0%Ef%BB%BF>

³⁴ “Jihad in Islam: Just-War Theory in the Quran and Sunnah,” Yaqeen, Sept 2, 2021. <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/jihad-in-islam-just-war-theory-in-the-quran-and-sunnah>

Why ISIS is NOT Islamic

In the rhetorical machinery of ISIS the meaning of Islam has been warped and weaponized by their political agenda to entail nothing short of global domination and perpetual, unjust warfare to eradicate all who stand in their way. Eager to find some scriptural grounding for their totalitarian ideas, such terrorists (as well as the Islamophobes who affirm their claims) will selectively misquote snippets of passages from the Qur'an and then generalize them with total disregard for textual and historical context, and reputable Islamic scholarship. For instance, they cite a phrase from a verse speaking about the Meccans who waged war against the Muslims saying, "Slay them wherever you find them" (Qur'an 2:191), ignoring both the immediately preceding verse: "Fight in the cause of God only those who fight you and do not commit aggression," and the subsequent verse: "But if they cease fighting, then let there be no hostility except against oppressors." Their spurious interpretations and misquotations lack academic merit and find no approval except from like-minded criminals and anti-Muslim xenophobic bigots. Although beyond the limited scope of this paper, a detailed exposition and rebuttal of commonly appealed to passages from the Qur'an used to malign Islam as an aggressive, violent, and war-mongering religion can be found [here](#) and [here](#).³⁵

Warfare for the likes of ISIS is not bound by the religious conditions prescribed within the Islamic tradition. They operate well outside the boundaries of justified defense, making their offensive, totalitarian motivated wage of war entirely unfounded in the Islamic faith. Moreover, and more pertinently, the violent, indiscriminate, and immoral methods of warfare they employ disregard the *jus in bello* necessitated by jihad. For them, Islam is manipulated and weaponized for their own personal gain as will be further shown in later chapters.

³⁵ M. Nazir Khan, "Top Five Misquotations of the Qur'an," Spiritual Perception, January 1, 2015, <https://spiritualperception.org/top-five-misquotations-of-the-quran/> and "Jihad in Islam: Just-War Theory in the Quran and Sunnah," *Yaqeen*, Sept 2, 2021. <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/jihad-in-islam-just-war-theory-in-the-quran-and-sunnah>

What about Sharia law?

The word ‘*sharī‘ah*’ is frequently bandied about, but there is a vast difference between what it actually means to mainstream Muslims and what it has been reduced to by totalitarian movements and the media.³⁶ In Arabic, ‘*sharī‘ah*’ literally means a path, and its principles are famously outlined by scholars when discussing the five *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah* (objectives of *sharī‘ah*): the preservation of human life, faith, intellect, wealth, and family.³⁷ It represents the path towards God and a holistic approach to increasing prosperity in society. *Sharī‘ah* must always be accompanied by *fiqh*, which is the human interpretation of how to apply the divine laws and principles in the physical world given a particular context.³⁸ *Fiqh* is dynamic, and many rulings contingent on social norms are evolving, changing with time and place.³⁹ Importantly, the human interpretation of *sharī‘ah* must always be consistent with Islamic theological principles upholding divine compassion, justice, and wisdom. As the famous Muslim theologian, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH) articulated,

The *sharī‘ah* is founded upon wisdom and the well-being of humanity in this life and the next. It is in its entirety justice, compassion, prosperity, and wisdom, and therefore anything which departs from justice to injustice, from compassion to its opposite, from welfare to harm, or from wisdom to

³⁶ See the discussion under “When Muslim Men and Women Express a Desire for Sharia, What Do They Mean?” in John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam* (Omaha: Gallup Press, 2008), 52–63, wherein they elucidate why this point is crucial for interpreting any data about Muslim attitudes.

³⁷ Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (d. 790 AH), *al-Muwafaqat* (Cairo: Dar Ibn Affan, 1997), 1:38.

³⁸ Muṣṭafā al-Zarqā’, *al-Madkhal al-fiqhī al-‘ām* (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 2004), 1:153.

³⁹ This is a major topic in Islamic jurisprudence, known as *taghayyur al-fatwa bi-taghayyur al-zaman* (the changing of religious edicts with the changing of times). For instance, al-Sarakhsi (d. 483 AH) frequently notes the changes in Abu Hanifah’s (d.150 AH) jurisprudence by his students Abu Yusuf (d.182 AH) and Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani (d.189 AH), arising not due to disagreement over sacred texts but simply because of the changing circumstances of society with time. See, for example, al-Sarakhsi, *al-Mabsūṭ* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifah, 1993), 8:178; Ibn Ābidīn, *Radd al-muhtār*, (Beirut: DKI, 1971), 1:166; al-Rafi’i, *Taqrīrāt al-Rāfi’i ‘alā hashiyat Ibn ‘Ābidīn* (Beirut: DKI, 2003), 1:16; Al-Qaraḍāwī, Yusuf. *Min Fiqh al-Dawla fīl-Islām* (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouq 2001) 2-3. If so many of the rulings related to societal issues (*mu‘āmalāt*) changed in one generation, there is an even greater need to reevaluate and contextualize rulings in the postindustrial age. For more information on the concept of change in Islamic rulings, refer to Nazir Khan, “Difference of Opinion: Where Do We Draw the Line?,” *Yaqeen*, December 10, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/difference-of-opinion-where-do-we-draw-the-line/>.

nonsense, then it is not part of the *sharīʿah*, even if it's included therein by misinterpretation.⁴⁰

To militant groups (and unfortunately, thanks to the media, pretty much everyone else as well), *sharīʿah* refers solely to a small set of criminal punishments known as the *hudūd*. In fact, the 2013 Pew polls⁴¹ are routinely cited by Islamophobes to back up the assertion that mainstream Muslims are not all too different from the militants—after all, large percentages of Muslims in several countries seem to favor severe corporal punishments, right? Well, as it turns out, this may be somewhat of a mischaracterization. A complete discussion of Islamic jurisprudence pertaining to the *hudūd* and contemporary Muslim attitudes towards the topic are beyond the scope of this paper. However, the problem with the survey approach is that it reduces respondents' answers to simplistic (frequently yes or no) answers, and the respondent has limited opportunity to convey their understanding or ignorance of the religious concepts being discussed. For instance, *ridda* (frequently translated as 'apostasy') in the books of some classical Islamic jurists was included not in the section of criminal punishments but in the section on warfare, since there was an implicit understanding that it applied to armed renegades.⁴² So to call this an 'apostasy law' is essentially a misnomer even though many modern-day Muslims may be entirely unaware of the historical context and detailed jurisprudential backdrop to this ruling. Islamic scholarship unequivocally affirms the practice of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, who very clearly established freedom of religion.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim, *I'lām al-muwaqqi'īn* (Dammam: Dar Ibn al-Jawzi 2002), 4:337.

⁴¹ *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics, and Society*, The Pew Research Center, April 30, 2013.

⁴² See, for example, al-Sarakhsī (d. 490 AH), Burhān al-Dīn al-Ḥanafī (d. 616 AH), Ibn al-Sa'āfi (d. 694 AH), Abu'l-Barakāt al-Nasafi (d. 710 AH). Ibn al-Humām (d. 861 AH) explicitly explains the reasoning to relate to the capacity to fight against Muslims. Ibn al-Humām, *Fath al-Qadīr* (Beirut: DKI 2002), 6:68. This understanding is also substantiated by other Prophetic narrations on the matter, which state that the punishment applies to the person who breaks off from and opposes the community—*al-mufāriqu li'l-jamā'ah* (*Sahih Muslim*, no. 1676). For a more detailed presentation of this perspective refer to Abd al-Muta'al al-Sa'idī, *al-Hurriyah al-dīniyyah fi al-Islām* (Alexandria: Maktabah al-Iskandariya, 2011). See also Jonathan Brown, "The Issue of Apostasy in Islam," *Yaqeen*, July 5, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/jonathan-brown/the-issue-of-apostasy-in-islam/>.

⁴³ The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ established an agreement with the Meccans called the treaty of Hudaibiyyah, in which one of the articles explicitly permitted a Muslim who left the faith to be able to return to the Meccans.

Moreover, the Pew poll also omitted from its published report some information that is absolutely essential in appropriately interpreting the survey data. By far, the most cited datum in the poll was the fact that 88% of Egyptians supported the death penalty for apostasy. However, the subgroup analysis found that Egyptians who did *not* want *sharī'ah* law were actually *more* likely to support the death penalty for apostasy (95.7%), as compared to those who were in favor of *sharī'ah* law (86.3%).⁴⁴ This may seem paradoxical; after all, why would people who don't want religious law have harsher attitudes on matters of religion? In truth, this attitude towards apostasy is not necessarily determined by a religious zeal to studiously follow sacred law, but in actual fact may be driven far more by deeply entrenched cultural perceptions of shame and honor, political ideas about opposing Westernization, or conflicts with other communities in the country (e.g., Coptic Christians). Muslim community leaders will also recognize this statistic as consistent with a broader phenomenon whereby some irreligious or less observant members of the community may actually have harsher and more intolerant views on matters of religion; this happens when religion is reduced to merely an identity label without the moderating effect of scholarly guidance. Data from Gallup polls found that Muslims who condemned terrorist actions frequently cited religious reasons for their condemnation, whereas those individuals who expressed sympathy usually cited political justifications.⁴⁵

Coming back to the issue of those corporal punishments that are prescribed by Islamic law, again crucial historical and interpretative context is lost in reductive polls. If asked if the statements in the Qur'an prescribing these laws are valid, of course one would expect the vast majority of Muslims to respond yes. But the far more important question is how are those laws to be understood and contextualized today—the *fiqh* question, if you will.⁴⁶ These laws are subject to lengthy discussion

⁴⁴ The numbers from the Pew poll are accurately cited here with confirmation from James Bell of the research center itself: "A Fact-Check of Bill Maher and His Critics: A Closer Look at Pew's (2013) Survey Report (Part 1)," *Empethop*, February 2, 2015, <http://empethop.blogspot.ca/2015/02/a-fact-check-of-bill-maher-and-his.html>. This blogger's personal commentary and attempted interpretations, however, seem poorly informed with respect to the underlying dynamics in Muslim society.

⁴⁵ As discussed in Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam*, 73–74.

⁴⁶ An overview of some of the diverse perspectives and debates on this topic can be found in R. H. A. AlSoufi, "Strategies for the Justifications of *Hudud Allah* and Their Punishments in the Islamic Tradition" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2012).

in the books of Islamic jurisprudence which place upon them such stringent conditions so as to render their execution almost entirely non-existent⁴⁷—and this is precisely in line with the Prophet’s emphasis on the *hudūd* serving primarily as psychological deterrents⁴⁸ and encouraging his followers to find excuses in favor of the accused so as *not* to apply them when he said,

Ward off the *hudūd* as much as you can; if there is any possible way to give the accused the benefit of the doubt, then do so. For a judge to err in pardon is far better than his erring in punishment.⁴⁹

There is another category of punishments called *ta’zīr* punishments, which are discretionary punishments that apply in cases that don’t fall under the crimes specified in the *hudūd*.

Suffice it to say, as the prosperous path to God and a harmonious society, Muslims are naturally expected to support *sharī’ah*. Yet, in stark contrast to the distorted presentation of *sharī’ah* by Islamophobes, the media, as well as by violent groups, the correct understandings of *sharī’ah* elaborated by Muslim scholarship are far more holistic, intricate and nuanced than they are branded to be.

Islamophobia in the media

It is unfortunate that a large segment of the popular media has implicitly accepted the understanding of Islam espoused by the terrorist fringe, and inadvertently promotes and normalizes this as a representation of Islam by repeating the description of ‘Islamic’ in association with daily crimes. Numerous politicians actually insist that the word Islam must be included when naming these

⁴⁷ Abd al-Aziz al-Fawzan, “Daḥḍ al-shubuhāt tuthār ḥawl al-‘uqubāt al-shar’iyyah,” *Majallah al-Bayan* (al-Muntada al-Islami) 18, no. 193 (Ramadan 1424/November 2003): 16. See also Ibn Uthaymīn, *Sharḥ al-Mumtī’* (Dammam: Dar ibn al-Jawzi 2007), 14:256-257.

⁴⁸ On deterrence (*zajr*) as an objective, this is an overarching philosophy of the penal system and applies to different scenarios; it is also mentioned in another context by al-Kāsānī, *Badā’ī al-sanā’ī* (Beirut: DKI 2003): 9:248.

⁴⁹ See *Jami’ al-Tirmidhi*, no. 1424 and *Sunan Ibn Majah*, no. 2642. This is also considered a foundational principle in modern law, known as Blackstone’s formulation, after the English jurist Sir William Blackstone (d. 1780 CE), who articulated it in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1760).

movements. “You can’t fight an enemy if you don’t know who you’re fighting!” they insist.

But how does it help us to identify the violent criminals if we amalgamate them with a faith community of 1.5 billion people? If we insist on using the same label for criminals and peaceful community members, chances are people are likely to mix them up. Islamophobia researcher Jasmine Zine notes, “The actions of groups like ISIS /Daesh and Al-Qaeda have nothing to do with the vast majority of Muslims worldwide, but all Muslims are called into account for the actions of these extremist groups.”⁵⁰ The constant bombardment of messages equating Islam with violence and terrorism has seen an explosive increase in contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment and hate crimes directed towards Muslims. When the bad guys are called by a plethora of monikers like “Radical *Islam*,” “*Islamic* terrorists,” and “*Islamists*” etc.—the only common denominator in these titles and the word that everyone will remember is, of course, simply Islam.

Capitalizing on this opportunity and as a strategic move to subdue dissent and legitimize their support and complicity with war crimes across the Muslim world, the securitization of Muslims and Islam has become a top priority in the War on Terror for most Western governments. This means that state actors view *all* Muslims through the lens of security, with their flawed and reductive understanding of Islam as the only trusted identifier marking a potential threat. As a result, governments are able to justify the introduction of overreaching powers that indiscriminately and unjustly affect the lives of their Muslim citizens. For example, an obsession with the idea of domestic traitors and the protection of ‘British values’ has resulted in draconian UK government policies such as Prevent, which implements a stringent surveillance of Muslim practice in schools, work places, and when accessing public services. Incorporated into this pathway to radicalisation are everyday overt Islamic practices, like wearing the hijab and praying.⁵¹ Additionally, there has also been an extension of the definition of

⁵⁰ Jasmin Zine, *Under Siege: Islamophobia and the 9/11 Generation*. (McGill Queen's University Press 2022), 46.

⁵¹ A plethora of research has emerged since the inception of Prevent, surveying its practice and impact. For more information see, Professor John Holmwood and Dr Layla Aitlhadj, “The People’s Review of Prevent,” Prevent Watch, 2022.

‘extremism’ to essentially refer to any Muslim individual or group that criticises government policy or practice, conveniently consuming most dominant pro-Palestinian, Muslim movements in the UK.⁵² Such policies emanate from a claim that they are protecting British society from the divisive threat of Islamism, whatever that may be.

The devastating impact that this has on the lives of Muslims living under such scrutiny is evident. Amongst such effects, is the growth of narratives of religious authenticity and acceptance. The faith community of 1.5 billion Muslims has been surreptitiously presented as ‘fake Muslims,’ as it is suggested that they are following an Islam that is not as legitimate. In an appearance on Bill Maher’s HBO show in 2014, the anti-Muslim polemicist Sam Harris stated that peaceful Muslims are “nominal Muslims who don’t take their faith seriously.” In other words, according to him, Muslims who aren’t violent are fake Muslims who aren’t actually practicing the tenets of their faith.

Sometimes the faith of mainstream Muslims is presented as being less authentic by failing to be *literal* in following scripture. This assumption that ‘literalism = radicalism,’ though widespread, is in fact academically unfounded. Chase Robinson, a professor of Islamic history, writes, “Here it bears emphasizing that Islamists are not ‘literalist’ in the sense that they cleave to the explicit or self-evident meaning of texts, such as the Qur’an or Prophetic traditions. Instead, they privilege those proof-texts that conform to their ideological presuppositions, ignoring or explaining away those that do not.”⁵³ Militant groups actually frequently engage in convoluted arguments and political/emotional rhetoric to try to convince Muslims that the straightforward meaning of Qur’anic injunctions can’t possibly be right—that the Qur’anic condemnation of suicide (Qur’an 4:29) doesn’t apply to suicide bombings (they like to call them ‘self-sacrificial martyrdom operations’), or that the Qur’anic law to only fight those who fight you

⁵² See, Khadijah Elshayyal, “UK extremism: Naming and shaming of Muslim groups aims to stifle all dissent,” Middle East Eye, 27 March 2024. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/uk-extremism-naming-shaming-muslim-groups-stifle-all-dissent-aims>

⁵³ Chase Robinson, *Islamic Civilization in Thirty Lives: The First 1,000 Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 211.

(Qur'an 2:190) must be understood figuratively in the broadest sense possible to make every human being on this earth a potential target.

Bin Laden, for instance, was once challenged on his approval for 9/11 when the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ clearly condemned any attacks on civilians. Bin Laden replied that the Prophet's instructions were relative, "I agree that the Prophet Muhammad forbade the killing of babies and women. That is true, but this is not absolute... We will do as they do. If they kill our women and our innocent people, we will kill their women and their innocent people until they stop."⁵⁴ Such movements draw upon notions of revenge, arguing that the enemy's murder of Muslim women and children justifies the retaliatory murder of their women and children—even though the very notion of revenge killings was a tribalistic pre-Islamic practice famously abolished by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.⁵⁵

In spite of all the misuse of the term 'extremism', Islam teaches us that religious extremism (*al-ghuluww*) is a reality that we need to beware of, as the Prophet Muhammad said, "Beware of extremism in religion (*al-ghuluww fī al-dīn*), for those who came before you were destroyed because of going to extremes in religious matters."⁵⁶ Extremism is defined according to the laws and limits of the *Sharī'ah*, not by what conflicts with secular interests. From the Islamic perspective, extremism arises when people selectively misuse or misinterpret some religious texts in order to advance their political agenda while disregarding clear-cut texts, principles and injunctions on the same topic. The Qur'an says, "As for those in whose hearts is a disease, they follow that which is ambiguous of the sacred texts, seeking to cause tribulation and seeking its interpretation, but it's true

⁵⁴ Osama Bin Laden, interview by Tayseer Alouni, Al Jazeera, October 21, 2001.

⁵⁵ ISIS also famously used this perverse logic of revenge as justification for the killing of American journalist Steven Sotloff. In their fourth issue of *Dabiq*, they wrote, "his killing was in consequence of US arrogance and transgression which all US citizens are responsible for as they are represented by the government they have elected, approved of, and supported, through votes, polls, and taxes." Cited in Lizzie Dearden, "Isis Publishes 'Letter' from Steven Sotloff to Family in Propaganda Magazine," *Independent*, October 14, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-publishes-letter-from-steven-sotloff-to-family-in-propaganda-magazine-9794613.html>. Sotloff's mother had a better understanding of Islam when she quoted the Qur'anic verse, "No soul is responsible for the sins of another." The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ abolished this practice of revenge killings immediately after he took control of Mecca, and he began by negating his own clan's claim to revenge in the death of the son of his cousin Rabi'ah ibn al-Harith.

⁵⁶ Sunan an-Nasa'i 3057, Sunan Ibn Majah 3029.

interpretation is known only by God and those firmly grounded in knowledge” (Qur’an 3:7). Far from being interested in literal interpretations, terrorist movements demonstrate blatant disregard for any instruction of scripture that proves inconvenient to their political interests. Yet, on the back of this deeply misconstrued interpretation of authenticity, the media, politicians and wider society have decided that the only socially ‘acceptable Muslim’ who doesn’t pose a security threat is one who disregards his/her overt religious obligations and who’s faith and belief is invisible in the public sphere, having no effect on the way they live their life.

Origins of violent movements in the Muslim world

If Islamic teachings clearly denounce such murders and killings, how did this mess come about? The phenomenon of terrorism is, in fact, a fairly recent phenomenon, and therefore any scientific attempt to account for its emergence must consider recent history. What happened to the Middle East that precipitated the modern turmoil and set the stage for the emergence of movements like Al-Qaeda and its even more abominable offspring, ISIS? Psychologically, what transformation must occur in the mind of a human being in order to make him capable of such savagery?

A wide survey of contemporary and historical cases would suggest to us that the emergence and proliferation of violent extremist movements, though multifactorial, might be summarized as involving the following three major factors: 1) political repression, turmoil, and instability; 2) a suffering and traumatized population; and 3) fanatical leaders with a totalitarian ideology.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ These three factors tend to be discussed in different bodies of literature given the highly compartmentalized nature of modern academia, with sociologists focusing on environmental factors and social injustices which mobilize populations, political scientists focusing on the influence of ideologues in structuring a political movement, and psychologists focusing on the impact of social isolation, alienation, and complex trauma. The reality of the matter is that all of these factors are relevant to the discussion, and an integrated approach is necessary.

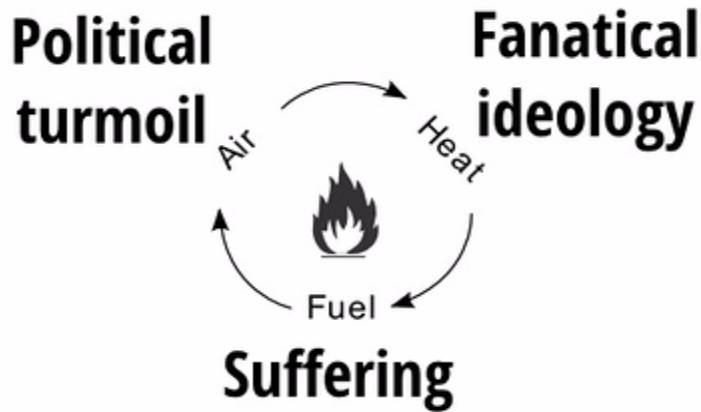


Figure 1: Like a combustion-triangle, three key factors are required for the emergence and proliferation of violent movements.

Like a fire that requires air, fuel, and heat, all three of the aforementioned elements are vital ingredients in the proliferation of violent extremist movements. It is easy to see how each of these factors has been involved in the recent history of the Middle East. Of all places in the Muslim world, this region suffered under the most abusive of dictatorships for a century, with the populace subjugated and stripped of basic human rights and freedoms. The region was also of keen interest to foreign powers and extensively militarized during the course of the ‘Oil Wars,’ as Toby Craig Jones, Professor of Middle Eastern History at Rutgers University notes:

The pattern of militarism that began in the Persian Gulf in the 1970s has partly been the product of American support for and deliberate militarization of brutal and vulnerable authoritarian regimes. Massive weapons sales to oil autocrats and the decision to build a geopolitical military order in the Gulf that depended on and empowered those rulers resulted in a highly militarized and fragile balance of power.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Toby Craig Jones, “America, Oil, and War,” *Middle East Journal of American History* 99 (2012): 208–18.

After decades of oppressive regimes and sanctions (which killed 227,000 Iraqi children between 1991–1998),⁵⁹ the situation escalated further with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which had catastrophic consequences for the region. [Some estimates](#) of the number of Iraqis killed within 3 years of the 2003 invasion reach almost as high as 700,000.⁶⁰ The extent of suffering in the region is difficult to fathom; one simple aspect of the severity may be appreciated by the following statistic: the city of Fallujah alone had 14 times as many radiation-related birth defects (from depleted uranium in munitions) than Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.⁶¹ Many of the severe deformities afflicting newborn babies had previously never been encountered by physicians.

A traumatized population is a vulnerable population. It provides a ripe context for the emergence of violent extremist movements with unprecedented savagery. Ian Robertson, professor of psychology and a neuroscientist, explains that whether it be the Nazi genocide of Jews, gypsies, and the disabled, or the Serbian massacre of Bosnians, or the Khmer Rouge slaughtering Cambodians—the origins of human savagery remain constant in spite of disparate ideologies. He points out that ISIS is fueled by a population exposed to savagery and the rhetoric of revenge.⁶² In the most extreme of situations, where carnage has been witnessed on a daily basis, the human mind becomes horribly traumatized.

After the 2003 war in Iraq, the existing regime was toppled and a power vacuum was created. In a region that previously had one-third of marriages between Shias and Sunnis, a novel breed of virulent sectarian politics emerged. The new government succeeded in alienating a diverse range of groups through its brutal

⁵⁹ Richard Garfield, *Morbidity and Mortality Among Iraqi Children from 1990 Through 1998: Assessing the Impact of the Gulf War and Economic Sanctions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 1999).

⁶⁰ Gilbert Burnham, Riyadh Lafta, Shannon Doocy, and Les Roberts, “Mortality After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-Sectional Cluster Sample Survey,” *The Lancet* 368, no. 9545 (2006): 1421–28.

⁶¹ Rania Khalek, “Iraqi Birth Defects Worse than Hiroshima,” *Rania Khalek* (blog), March 20, 2013, <https://raniakhalek.com/u-s-turns-a-blind-eye-to-iraqi-birth-defects-worse-than-hiroshima/>.

⁶² Ian Robertson, “The Science Behind Isil's Savagery,” *Telegraph*, November 17, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/11041338/The-science-behind-Isils-savagery.html>.

persecution of opponents. Moreover, the former military forces of Saddam Hussein's regime played a critical role in the ensuing developments.

In August 2014, *The New York Times* reported that many of the leading generals in ISIS were former military officers of Saddam Hussein's regime.⁶³ This ought to strike us as strange—why would former staunch secularist Baathist generals join a so-called religious movement? Did they experience a spiritual awakening overnight, or is it far more likely that opportunistic, power-hungry individuals were eager to do anything to get back into power and therefore joined forces with ISIS to fight the government? Indeed, historian and research fellow Truls Hallberg Tønnessen notes that many of the US prisons like Camp Bucca served as 'melting pots' for insurgents, petty criminals, and Ba'athist officers to come together with their shared enmity for the Shi'ite government of Nuri al-Maliki to forge a new organization with a new ideology.⁶⁴

Criminals, soldiers, fanatics, rebels came together and this local unholy alliance led to the formation of the modern terrorist group known as ISIS. The religious ideological rhetoric provided a means for global outreach and a platform to summon recruits worldwide. In the West, the individuals who left to join ISIS were lured by rhetoric of an existential conflict between the West and Islam (rhetoric which continues to be augmented by popular media outlets in the West). Individuals involved in terrorism tend to be socially isolated, often radicalized through the internet, disengaged from their local Muslim community and they [lack basic knowledge of Islam](#). An MI5 research document [discussed in *The Guardian*](#), noted:

Far from being religious zealots, a large number of those involved in terrorism do not practise their faith regularly. Many lack religious literacy and could actually be regarded as religious novices. Very few have been

⁶³ Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, "Military Skill and Terrorist Technique Fuel Success of ISIS," *New York Times*, August 27, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/28/world/middleeast/army-know-how-seen-as-factor-in-isis-successes.html?r=0>.

⁶⁴ Truls Hallberg Tønnessen, "Heirs of Zarqawi or Saddam? The Relationship Between al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State," *Perspectives On Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (August 2015).

brought up in strongly religious households, and there is a higher than average proportion of converts. Some are involved in drug-taking, drinking alcohol, and visiting prostitutes. MI5 says there is evidence that a well-established religious identity actually protects against violent radicalisation.⁶⁵

Unpacking the ideology of ISIS and violent extremism

This is a component of the discussion that seems to evade even the most well-educated and well-intentioned writers, and yet it is the most critical. Many Muslims, eager to disavow any connection between Islam and violence, make the mistake of chalking everything up to political events and ignore how violent movements employ religious rhetoric as a critical tool in developing their totalitarian and xenophobic ideologies. On the other hand, many writers talk solely of ideology and make the mistake of assuming these movements arise in a socio-political vacuum. They pay no attention to the impact of political instability, oppression, and ongoing warfare in influencing the day-to-day concerns of people in Muslim societies.⁶⁶ Moreover, as anthropologist Gabriele Marranci notes,

The main reason [for focusing exclusively on ideology] is that these scholars have never lived with, and often never even spoken to, Muslims from different countries and communities.⁶⁷

Many pundits and polemicists persevere on the religion of Islam itself, failing to differentiate between the Islam of mainstream Muslims and the particular

⁶⁵ Alan Travis, “MI5 Report Challenges Views on Terrorism in Britain,” *Guardian*, August 20, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/aug/20/uksecurity.terrorism1>.

⁶⁶ Anthropologist Gabriel Marranci outlines the following three theses that are typically encountered in the academic debate about the emergence of violent movements: “Islam, as religion, is more prone to violence and fundamentalism (Bruce 2000); fundamentalists are Muslims with political aims who manipulate Islam for their own ideological purposes (Esposito 2002, Hafez 2003, Milton-Edwards 2005); and finally, the representation of Islamic fundamentalism as a historical process was started by charismatic Islamic ideologues (such as Mawdudi, Al-Banna, and Qutb).” Gabriel Marranci, *Understanding Muslim Identity—Rethinking Fundamentalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 21.

⁶⁷ Marranci, 58.

ideological doctrines developed by criminal organizations that set them apart from the vast majority of the Muslim faith community. They claim the word ‘Islam’ must be used to appropriately identify the enemy. Yes, it is perilous to fail to recognize the ideology of your opponents. It is even more perilous, however, to reduce their ideology to the label ‘Islam’ which is shared by one-fifth of the world’s population, and thereby deliberately ignore what sets this group apart and motivates its behavior.

So, what *are* the key philosophies drawn upon by these movements? How did these ideas evolve and how do they differ from what mainstream Muslims believe? What tenets did these movements invent that took them from theology to mythology in the eyes of mainstream Muslims?

Some sociologists and political scientists have focused their attention on a historical genealogy of the ideas of radical groups, tracing a lineage of several influential thinkers and the context in which they emerged. Many voices within the Muslim world began to place greater emphasis on political mobilization and opposition to the Westernization of Muslim lands in the aftermath of colonialism.⁶⁸ In this period, Muslim-majority countries suffered under oppressive dictatorships, many of which actively sought to stamp out public freedoms and aggressively secularize the population. Some political activists sought to mobilize the public against these repressive governments, arguing that the primary objective of Islam was to establish a sovereign political force ruling in God’s name and dismantling secular rule. This rhetoric was later seized by extremists who combined it with a doctrine of universal and perpetual conflict against all non-Muslims.

In 1979, when Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviet Union, there were resistance fighters who called upon Muslims worldwide to join their campaign, arguing that it was compulsory upon every Muslim to defend the Muslim lands against foreign invaders, and that it was only through physical jihad that Islam could be saved in

⁶⁸ Milton-Edwards offers a perspective on how this tension has shaped many of the modern movements in her book, *Islamic Fundamentalism Since 1945* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

the modern world. However, as certain political factions became involved, the rhetoric became increasingly more extreme and distant from the teachings of Islam.

In 1996, Bin Laden issued a call for war against America, citing the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, American involvement in the loss of Muslim life through support of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and economic sanctions in Iraq, as well as involvement in other regional conflicts in the Muslim world.⁶⁹ The grievances against US foreign policy were ones that many Muslims and non-Muslims also held. In fact, in a recent bizarre resurfacing of Bin Laden's 'Letter to America' outlining his reasons for war that went viral on TikTok in late 2023, many American non-Muslims expressed surprise at their agreement with his justification for going to war (*jus ad bellum*). This is precisely how he had initially garnered support. By articulating Muslim grievances around the world, Bin Laden sought to expand his reach and appeal, but in sanctioning horrific attacks on civilians, he betrayed his blatant disregard for the ethical code of Islam concerning the appropriate tactics in war (*jus in bello*). Although he called upon Muslims to set aside their differences and unite for greater political strength, with the emergence of the Al-Qaeda offshoot in Iraq, ISIS, the outcome was only more virulent sectarianism and greater totalitarian intolerance and violence. For ISIS, war is not a means, but an end in and of itself; bloodshed and carnage itself is glorified and celebrated. Thus, a series of ideological mutations and political transformations culminated in ISIS, a cult steeped in a mythology of violence.

So what are the characteristic components of the ideology that defines criminal groups like ISIS? These groups have taken terms from Islamic theology and assigned them new fabricated understandings in order to create a violent mythology that bears no resemblance to Islam's actual teachings. Their mythology may be summarized as comprising five pillars that distort Islamic teachings: 1) a counterfeit caliphate; 2) dehumanization in the name of *walaa' wal-baraa'*; 3) *takfir* absolutism; 4) indiscriminate violence masquerading as jihad; and 5)

⁶⁹ Christopher M. Blanchard, "Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology," CRS Report for Congress RL32759 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 9, 2007), 3, www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32759.pdf.

apocalypticism. Each of these doctrines warrants a separate article of its own to elaborate its implications and origins. However, only a brief explanation can be offered at present.

ISIS's fake *khilāfah*

ISIS claimed to have re-established the caliphate. But what exactly does that mean and why does their movement fail? The *khilāfah* (or caliphate) linguistically means succession but has historically been used to refer to the political leadership of the Islamic world. Precisely what type of political leadership it entails is somewhat broad given that the term *khilāfah* has been applied to those voluntarily selected by the community (such as during the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs - the first four caliphs of the Islamic community), hereditary kingship (like the Umayyads and most Muslim dynasties), and as mere political figureheads bereft of power (such as the Abbasid rulers under the Buwayhid and Seljuk empires). As for how to define the concept of *khilāfah* and Islamic government in the modern age of nation-states and international relations, there has been no shortage of different proposals in literature describing various conceptions of constitutional democracy, centralized versus decentralized governance, and popular sovereignty.⁷⁰ Crucially, militant movements are unconcerned with articulating any coherent political system of government because what matters to them is the mere symbolic value and surface image of *khilāfah*.

The word *khilāfah* draws on the collective longing of Muslims across the globe for a return to their pre-colonial past of self-governance according to their values. Muslims around the world frequently discuss the golden age of Islamic science, the historical tradition of scholarship, the universities and hospitals that were pioneered in the Muslim world, and so on. But to think, by the mere

⁷⁰ For a review and bibliography of such works, refer to Andrew F. March, *Political Islam: Theory* (2015). For a contemporary exposition of the concept of *khilāfah* see Ovamir Anjum, "Who Wants the Caliphate?," *Yaqeen*, October 31, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/ovamiranjum/who-wants-the-caliphate/>.

pronouncement of the word *khilāfah*, that suddenly this grand civilization will come crashing out of the desert is sheer fantasy.

What is important is not the leader's title but rather the actual form of rule and the establishment of Islamic ethical principles in governance—justice, transparency, and upholding the rights of the people.⁷¹ Islamic scholars have articulated that a defining element in a Muslim nation is that justice and security are established.⁷² The ruler is to be the *wakīl* (representative) and *khādim* (servant) of the people, not their overlord.⁷³ The situation of Muslim lands will not be rectified without the re-introduction of such ethical principles of governance.

Dehumanization in the name of *walā' wal-barā'*

The term *walā' wal-barā'* (lit. loyalty and disavowal) refers to the Islamic teaching that believers should maintain solidarity with their community and recognize what distinguishes them from other groups who do not subscribe to the same belief and value system. It describes an affinity towards all that is virtuous and loved by God and the people of virtue, while seeking to dissociate oneself from matters that are immoral and odious to God and the parties that support them. However, this concept, when warped and distorted in the minds of militants, becomes a reductionistic binary classification of all human beings into good versus evil, with the claim being that all non-Muslims must be regarded as evildoers and treated with hostility.⁷⁴ Framing the world into a conflict of “*us versus them*,” fails to recognize that many of those most vocal in their support for the rights of Muslims

⁷¹ Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH) writes, “The purpose of religious law is the establishment of justice amongst people, so whichever method leads to upholding justice and fairness is considered to be part of the religion's teachings, and not contradictory to it.” Abbreviated from a larger selection of quotes cited in Muhammad Ammarah, *Ma'rikah al-mustalahat bayna al-gharb wal-Islam* (Cairo: Nahdah Misr, 2004), 179.

⁷² Imam Abu Hanifah (d. 150 AH): “The purpose (*maqṣūd*) of calling a certain land ‘Land of Islam’ or ‘Land of disbelief (*kufṛ*),’ is not about Islam or *kufṛ*. It is about security versus fear.” He goes on to explain that the former is a land that offers Muslims and non-Muslims under its covenant (*Dhimmīs*) safety and security, while the latter leaves Muslims in a state of fear. See Al-Kasānī, *Badā'ī al-sanā'ī* (Beirut: DKI 2003), 9:573.

⁷³ For a concise overview, see the discussion on this topic in Ahmad al-Raysuni, *Fiqh al-thawrah* (Cairo: Dar al-Kalimah, 2013), 22–27.

⁷⁴ For a perspective outlining the error of this negative reductionistic attitude in detail refer to Abdullah al-Ṭarīqī, *al-Ta'āmul ma'a ghayr al-Muslimīn: usūl mu'āmalatihim wa isti'mālihim: Dirāsah fiqhīyyah* (Riyadh: Dar al-Fadilah, 2007), 90–95, 143.

are in fact non-Muslims. The misuse of this concept serves to dehumanize the outsider and demonstrate no concern for his or her well-being. Any Muslim maintaining positive relations with non-Muslims is seen as a traitor according to such misguided rhetoric, and therefore included amongst the evildoers as well.

This is diametrically opposed to the practice and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. He welcomed people of all faith communities and backgrounds as illustrated in the preceding examples of the Christian diplomats of Najran and the Jewish families in Madinah, and he sought to protect the rights of both Muslims and non-Muslims, as demonstrated by his involvement in the pledge known as *Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl* (an agreement of several clans in Mecca to protect anyone who was oppressed). The Prophet ﷺ demonstrated respect and appreciation for non-Muslims like Muṭ'im ibn Adī who stood up for the Muslims against the Quraysh boycott. And the Prophet ﷺ taught his followers that they could live happily alongside the rest of their tribesmen who were not Muslim, as he famously told one of his companions named Fudayk.⁷⁵ The Qur'an is very clear (9:60) that a goal of Islam, even *zakāt* in particular, is to endear others' hearts towards the Muslim community, which can never come about through hostility. The early generations of Muslims understood these principles well; when Umar ibn al-Khattab (ra) was the ruler of the Muslim empire, a Christian peasant from Egypt came before him and presented his complaint against a Muslim prince, and Umar, finding the prince to have mistreated the peasant, ruled that the peasant was to exact retribution.⁷⁶

Passages that militants cite to espouse an ideology of existential conflict tend to be misquotations from verses referring to the Muslims' situation with the Meccan Quraysh. For instance, verse 60:1 of the Qur'an begins by saying, "Take not My enemies and your enemies as patrons" but goes on to explain in the very same verse that this refers to the tribe of the Quraysh who "expelled the Messenger and his followers simply for their belief in Allah as their Lord" (Qur'an 60:1).

⁷⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Hibban*, no. 4969.

⁷⁶ Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ Miṣr*; vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabah al-Thaqafah al-Deeniyah, 2010), 195.

The passage goes on to provide the example of Prophet Abraham who disavowed his people once they had rejected him and sought to throw him in a pit of fire. Clearly, these verses do not describe the normative mode of interaction with peaceful non-Muslims, and the subsequent passage explicitly discusses that:

God does not dissuade you from dealing justly and compassionately with those who do not fight you on account of your faith nor drive you from your homes. Indeed, God loves those who are just (Qur'an 60:8).

***Takfīr* absolutism**

A central dogma of violent movements is the excommunication of any Muslim who disagrees with their principles. In Arabic, excommunication is called *takfīr*—the practice of pronouncing someone a *kāfir* (disbeliever). In Sunni Islam, this is a legal edict issued which is subject to stringent conditions and issued only by qualified jurists and theologians in exceptional circumstances.⁷⁷ However, violent movements engage in an absolutist version of *takfīr* whereby anyone who disagrees with their movement is declared a *kāfir*. The ubiquitous practice of *takfīr* was a characteristic feature of an early heretical group in Islamic history known as the Khawarij. The Khawarij even fought against the companions of the Prophet ﷺ, feeling so assured of their own religiosity and purity. The Qur'an prohibits this attitude of self-righteousness, stating,

Do not say to those who offer you greetings of peace, 'You are not a believer!' (Qur'an 4:94).

And the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ condemned it by saying,

⁷⁷ For an elaboration on the understanding of *takfīr* in Sunni Islam, refer to the author's paper on difference of opinion: Nazir Khan, "Difference of Opinion: Where Do We Draw the Line?," *Yaqeen*, December 10, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/difference-of-opinion-where-do-we-draw-the-line/>.

Whoever accuses his brother of disbelief, then surely one of them is such.⁷⁸

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ prophesied the emergence of the Khawarij and described their traits—zealous youth without reliance on scholars, outwardly religious but bereft of true spirituality, with impressive slogans but evil actions.

Takfir is also employed by violent movements to declare all Muslim lands to be lands of disbelief as they are ruled by rulers who are guilty of “ruling by something other than what God has revealed.” Feeding off popular sentiments of discontent with the existing dictatorships in Muslim lands, these movements are able to recruit people to their cause under the pretext of ushering in a reign of true faith.

Indiscriminate violence masquerading as jihad

Jihad is easily the most misused of all Islamic vocabulary. Linguistically, the word denotes a struggle, and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ stated,

The one who performs jihad is the person who struggles against his own desires for the sake of God.⁷⁹

The Qur'an does have a concept of physical jihad as well—the legitimate and just exercise of military force to ward off enemy attacks (Qur'an 22:39) and to rescue others from oppression (Qur'an 4:75). However, the Qur'an does not permit violence against civilians or anyone not engaged in combat against the Muslims (2:190). Importantly, Islam does not consider physical combat or warfare intrinsically desirable or virtuous, let alone ‘holy’, it is only prescribed as a means to remove harm and oppression as the noted Islamic jurist Izz ibn Abdul-Salam (d. 660 AH) explained:

⁷⁸ *Saḥīḥi Bukhārī*, no. 6103.

⁷⁹ *Musnad Aḥmad*, no 23958.

One cannot come closer to God through any type of harm or evil. That's why the Prophet Muhammad said when praising God, "All good is in Your Hand, and nothing bad is for you", meaning nothing bad can be a means of drawing closer to God.

For one can only come closer to God through the categories of benefit and goodness, and not through the types of harm and evil. This is unlike the unjust rulers with whom one may achieve closeness through acts of evil, like usurping wealth, killing others, oppressing people, spreading corruption, manifesting sinfulness, destroying lands. Meanwhile, one only comes close to the Lord of lords through truth and righteousness.

If it is said, "Jihad is destruction, loss of life and wealth, but is a means of closeness to God", we reply, "it is not a means of closeness to God through destruction, but rather it only becomes a means of closeness to God insofar as it leads to the removal of harm and the attainment of benefit."⁸⁰

To the architects of violent unislamic movements like ISIS, the term jihad is ripe for exploitation. They ardently maintain that the relation between Muslims and non-Muslims must always be characterized by perpetual violence and bloodshed until the apocalypse. In order to substantiate this notion, recourse is often made to the works of classical jurists who lived in times of imperial conquest and advocated a continuous "expansionist" policy against hostile political forces. However, as Professor Sherman Jackson demonstrates, the central concern of such jurists, like Ibn Rushd (d. 595 AH) and others, was actually the security of Muslim lands living under the constant threat of foreign invasion.⁸¹ On the other hand, extremist movements jeopardize the safety of all humanity and engage in senseless bloodshed, and therefore, their methods are completely antithetical to the teachings of Islam. They totally disregard the Prophetic emphasis placed on establishing

⁸⁰ Al-'Izz ibn Abdul-Salam, *Qawa'id al-Ahkam*, 1:185.

⁸¹ Sherman A. Jackson, "Jihad and the Modern World," *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2002), 17

peace, as in the treaty of Hudaibiyyah, or the Qur'anic instruction to stop fighting as soon as the enemy stops fighting:

If they desist, then let there be no aggression except against the oppressors.
(Qur'an 2:193)

These movements argue that violent upheaval is justified as the only way to bring about the restoration of the caliphate. Education, social reform, health care, employment—all are dismissed by these ideologues as inept solutions at improving Muslim societies. In their minds, only violence can rescue the Muslim world. It is worth asking them, has any of this violence actually solved any of the problems of the Muslim world? Who has benefited from all this carnage? Has the oppression in Muslim lands that was complained of been alleviated or has it intensified? Have innocent lives been saved or lost? Has hostility towards Islam and crimes against Muslims been reduced or have they been amplified? Clearly, this methodology amounts to nothing but deplorable carnage and abject asininity.

Apocalypticism

The final totem in the mythological structure of extremists' beliefs is the absurd notion that they are agents of the apocalypse, the midwives of its birth into this world. Muslims believe in an afterlife and Islamic eschatology includes discussions on the 'end of times' where immorality and violence will become prevalent. However, what separates the apocalypticist vision of ISIS from normative Muslim belief is that ISIS believes that it can bring about the apocalypse and actually trigger a final battle between good and evil at Dabiq (the town after which they had named their magazine). As a result of their bizarre eschatological interpretations, they believe that since slavery will become more prevalent towards the end of times, they personally must bring that about by enslaving others.

Their approach misses several basic fundamentals of Islamic theology. First, the Day of Judgment cannot be brought about by anyone except God. Human beings

can only continue to do good deeds for as long as their time is here on Earth. Secondly, just because something is a sign of the end of times, does not mean that one can derive a religious ruling from it. To claim that one should enslave people because in the end of times there will be more slaves is false—Islam sought to eradicate slavery.⁸² The Prophet ﷺ explained that on Judgment Day the one who enslaves a free person will have to contend with God as his adversary,⁸³ and the Qur'an states that the way to God is by freeing slaves (90:11-16). Thirdly, one cannot insist on a particular interpretation of the signs that the Prophet ﷺ mentioned will precede the Day of Judgment. For instance, the strongest interpretation of the *hadith* being alluded to (“A slave will give birth to her master”)⁸⁴ suggests that it refers to an increase in negative attitudes of youth towards their parents.

With the passage of time, all of ISIS's eschatological misinterpretations have been proven fictional, as their movement has already disappeared territorially after only a few years, failing to establish any lasting governance and having accomplished nothing for the Muslim *ummah* but destruction and distraction.

Conclusion

Achieving a positive impact on humanity is the holiest of ambitions. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “The best of people are those who benefit others the most.”⁸⁵ Islam is a way of life that unites humankind's spiritual journey towards God with their moral journey to care for others. It is a way of life that characterized one of

⁸² The Prophet Muhammad himself personally freed sixty-three slaves during his life, his wife Aisha freed sixty-nine slaves, and his companions freed numerous slaves, most notably his companion 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf who freed an astounding thirty-thousand. For more information on how Islamic teachings dealt with slavery, refer to Nazir Khan, “Divine Duty: Islam and Social Justice,” *Yaqeen*, February 4, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/divine-duty-islam-and-social-justice/>.

⁸³ *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* no. 2227.

⁸⁴ Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (d. 852 AH) in *Fath al-Bārī sharḥ Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut: al-Risalah al-Alamiyyah 2013), 1:262. See also the alternate view in al-Qastallani's *Irshād al-sārī* and al-Kashmiri's *Fayḍ al-Bārī* that it is a linguistic device referring to the general reversal of affairs.

⁸⁵ Al-Tabarānī, *Mu'jam al-awsaṭ*, no. 5787.

the greatest civilizations in history, and it is a way of life that is dear to a fifth of the world's population today.

The horrific ideological violence in the modern world is a calamity that threatens us all and collective effort is necessary to counter it at all levels. But when pundits and politicians engage in Islamophobic rhetoric and label Islam itself as the enemy, they do something disastrous—they draw battle lines in ways that place Muslims squarely on the side of the enemy. They have blurred the lines between who is justifiably deemed a terrorist and who is not. They use the hatred of genuine criminal, terrorist organizations abroad to cast any Muslim group that doesn't serve their interests into the same fatal pot and stoke the flames of hatred against Muslim families at home. And they serve the interests of terrorist organizations who know that such rhetoric will further alienate minorities and convince the socially isolated that there truly is a war against Islam. The narrative promoted by both anti-Muslim hatemongers and violent fanatics must be countered with factual and objective analysis on the topic of Islam and violence. The preceding discussion provided by this article highlights several important points:

- (1) Violence is not inherent in any particular belief system, but rather violent movements can draw upon religion, nationalism, ethnicity, culture, or any non-religious ideology to construct a totalitarian ideology.
- (2) Islam represents a global faith community of over 1.8 billion people who uphold the values of compassion such as those embodied in the verse, “Return an evil deed with a good deed, so that the one who was your enemy may become your close friend” (Qur'an 41:34), as well as in the practice of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ who preached tolerance and mercy for all.
- (3) Terrorist movements manipulate religious rhetoric and re-purpose Islamic vocabulary to serve their own agenda. Although they identify with the same word ‘Islam,’ on examination they share nothing with the mainstream Muslim community in terms of values and demonstrate blatant disregard for the sacred scripture and fundamental tenets of Islam. ISIS had no interest in engaging in a just war, and used savage, unlawful means to further its agenda.

- (4) There is a particular set of doctrines that sets these extreme violent elements apart from the mainstream Muslim community, and attention should be paid to countering these doctrines and supporting efforts within the Muslim community that dismantle their rhetoric through recourse to normative Islamic teachings. It is also important to realize that violent movements do not emerge in a vacuum but tend to develop in the setting of political instability and upheaval, fanatical ideologues, and a population traumatized by war.
- (5) The opportune demonization of Islam and Muslims by Western powers and media has had a profound and detrimental effect on the lives of their Muslim citizenry, infringing on their freedom to practice and legitimate engagement in activism. Efforts should be made to counter this in every respect.

It is only through supporting educational efforts that cultivate the values of love, compassion, justice, and respect for all humanity that we may progress towards solving the current challenges.