# Forever on Trial: Islam and the Charge of Violence

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# Author Biography

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**The infamous essay "What ISIS really wants" in *The Atlantic* included the vacuous statement, "The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic." Of course, this means absolutely nothing without explaining what we mean by the five letter word 'Islam,' who gets to define it, and why every reputable authority in the mainstream community has declared the ideology of ISIS to be a violation of Islam. The present article sets the record straight on extremism, Islamophobia, and religious violence.**

*I think Islam hates us.* —Donald J. Trump, US president-elect

Islam has become a hot topic today in the media and in public discourse, debated amongst politicians and pundits, activists and academics, and laypeople of all walks of life. As repeated incidents of violence occur in the name of Islam, Muslims have become accustomed to their faith community being placed on trial in the media at each occurrence. The accusation is that Islam itself is responsible for the violence and, by extension, all adherents of Islam are guilty of espousing a doctrine that sanctions violence. Influenced by this rhetoric, many have taken action against Muslims and hate crimes have seen an unprecedented spike in the West.[1]

In October 2016, the FBI arrested a right wing "Crusaders" militia group in Kansas that had stockpiled firearms, ammunitions, and explosives with plans to launch an attack on local Muslim immigrants, believing "the only good Muslim is a dead Muslim."[2] In August 2016, an imam and his assistant in New York were leaving their mosque when they were suddenly shot in the head in broad daylight by a man who had previously described his hatred towards Muslims.[3] In June 2016, a petrol bomb was detonated outside a mosque in Perth while hundreds of worshippers were inside.[4] In 2011, Anders Behring Breivik committed a mass killing of 77 people in Norway in order to draw attention to his manifesto outlining an

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[1] 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
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-levin-jd/hate-crime-in-us-survey-u_b_12600232.html.
[2] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/militia-terror-plot-fbi-kansas_us_58014995e4b0162c043c1e90.
[3] http://nypost.com/2016/08/15/man-charged-with-murder-for-executing-imam-assistant/.
[4] http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/australia-mosque-targeted-firebomb-attack-160629061714982.html

anti-Islam crusade, focusing on Islam as the greatest threat to Europe, and citing a well known American Islamophobe no less than 64 times.[5] 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.

None of these responses have brought 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, how they draw upon religious doctrines, and how their use of religion differs from the manner in which religion is known and practiced by mainstream community members. These are the issues that need to be elucidated. The current article aims to rectify the contemporary discourse by specifying the nature of movements perpetrating violence in the name of Islam. A more productive discourse is necessary for society to move past the current trends of bigotry and hostile rhetoric and start working together to actually solve contemporary challenges.

The current paper is organized around four major issues: associating religion with violence; associating Islam, in particular, with violence; the origins of violent movements in the Muslim world; and an ideological analysis of violent movements.

## Associating religion with violence

When we read current headlines regarding terrorism or rampant acts of violence committed in the name of religion, the popular knee-jerk reaction is often 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

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[5] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/25/us/25debate.html.

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*? Consider for instance the conflicts surrounding nationalism underlying World War I, which claimed the lives of 15 million[6] or the fascism involved in World War II, which claimed the lives of some 60-80 million.[7] The French revolution, often said to have been rooted in the principles of liberalism and the Enlightenment, culminated in up to forty thousand beheadings! By what statistical measure does one argue that a religious ideology carries greater potency for warfare than any other ideology?

And what of the massive 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.[8] The total bloodshed carried out under the Soviet reign was massive; an estimated 62 million were killed.[9]

This brief historical reflection should illustrate then that it is not the religious or secular content of an ideology that determines its potential for spawning violence. Rather, it is its xenophobic and totalitarian character that 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.

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[6] *World War I: 1914–1918 (Wars Day by Day)*. Jason Turner.
[7] http://necrometrics.com/20c5m.htm.
[8] *The Age of Atheists*. Peter Watson. Ch 10—The Bolshevik Crusade for Scientific Atheism. He cites as a source, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* by Paul Froese.
[9] *Death by Government*. R.J. Rummel (Rutgers, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

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."[10] He proceeds to emphasize the importance of countering hate speech and propaganda that dehumanizes minorities and foments hostile treatment towards them.

This also serves as a simple litmus test for evaluating an ideology—if it promotes vitriolic and hostile 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 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.[11] 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.

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[10] 1998 Gregory H. Stanton. http://www.genocidewatch.org/aboutgenocide/8stagesofgenocide.html.

[11] 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." Caselli, F. and Coleman, W. J. (2013), On The Theory Of Ethnic Conflict. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 11: 161–192.

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 solidarity[12]—these are critical factors, which 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 lays fertile soil for external instrumentalization of religion by militants 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,[13] the Khmer Rouge's human experimentation,[14] or phrenology;[15] 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.

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

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[12] For a discussion on the relevance of religion and language to intra-group 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* Vol. 37, Iss. 4, 2016.

[13] http://www.holocaustmuseumswfl.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Boxcar-Activities-for-Science.pdf.

[14] http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/31/world/asia/31cambo.html.

[15] https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2013/feb/05/django-unchained-racist-science-phrenology.

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.

## Associating Islam with violence—Blaming Islam and Muslims

Today it, unfortunately, goes without saying that the most incessant allegations of violence have been attributed to Islam, given the modern emergence of terrorist groups explicitly linking Islam to their murderous actions. As a result of the claims of these criminal organizations, aspersions have been cast on the global community of 1.6 billion Muslims who must now struggle daily to dissociate themselves from crimes they had nothing to do with. Literally every significant Muslim authority and organization, imams and mosques the world over, have repeatedly voiced their condemnations of violence in every form imaginable, but unfortunately, they have fallen on largely deaf ears. 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.

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.' But what are we actually arguing about? Who has the most right to decide the definition of this five letter word, 'I-S-L-A-M'? It should be blatantly obvious that the word 'Islam' means something totally different when it comes out of the mouth of a terrorist than when it is mentioned by the one-and a-half billion women, men, and children who

consider themselves true representatives of this faith community.[16] The name on the label might be the same, but the contents of the package are totally different.

Qur'anic condemnation of violence:

> *Whoever kills a soul, it is as if he has slain all humanity* (5:32)

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

> *Fight only those who fight you and do not commit aggression* (2:190)

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

## Islam in the minds of Muslims

To mainstream Muslims, Islam represents a spiritual journey towards God by worshipping Him alone and caring for His creation (Qur'an 4:36). Muslims around the world affirm mercy and compassion (*rahmah* in Arabic) 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

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[16] This fallacy was also evident in a much publicized 2015 article in *The Atlantic* entitled "What ISIS really wants'' wherein author Graeme Wood included the vacuous statement, "The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic.'' This of course means absolutely nothing without specifying whether we are using a definition of Islam according to the terrorists or according to mainstream Muslims. The article attempted to substantiate this bizarre assertion using sporadic scriptural citations with no reference to normative exegesis of those same passages from reputable authorities within the mainstream Muslim community. In fact, the main academic reference for the article, Princeton professor Bernard Haykel, 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.'' 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 unIslamic. Curiously, Wood's article demonstrated a greater interest in differentiating the doctrines of ISIS from Al-Qaeda than it did in differentiating either group from mainstream Islam.

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" (*Jami' al-Tirmidhi*) and to "donate in charity to people of all faiths" (*Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah*). 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),

and the Prophet ﷺ said:

> *A person can only remain sound in his faith so long as he does not shed blood (Sahih Bukhari).*

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ established a [famous charter](#) declaring the Christian Monks of St. Catherine to be under his protection, and he established the famous constitution of Madinah declaring mutual support between Muslims and Jews and upholding freedom of religion for both communities.[17] 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,[18] and he hosted the Christians of Najran in his mosque where they were able to perform their own prayers and religious services.[19] 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

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[17] Arjomand, Saïd Amir. The Constitution of Medina: A Sociolegal Interpretation of Muhammad's Acts of Foundation of the "Umma." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41.4 (2009): 555-75. Web

[18] 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. Kitab al-Amwal, Abu Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam d. 224 H, pp. 727–728, Dar alShuruq 1989.

[19] *Seerah Ibn Hisham*, vol. 2, p. 239.

teachings relating to interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims, refer to this article.[20]

## Islam in the minds of terrorists

To a terrorist, however, the word Islam signifies something totally different. It has been warped and weaponized by their political agenda to entail nothing short of global domination and perpetual warfare to eradicate all who oppose them. 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 (see this article for a detailed exposition)[21] and find no approval except from like-minded criminals and anti-Muslim xenophobic bigots.

## But don't Muslims also support *Shari'ah*?

The word '*Shari'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.[22] In Arabic, '*Shari'ah*' literally means a path, and its principles are famously outlined by scholars when discussing the five *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* (objectives of *Shar'iah*): the preservation

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[20] Khan MN. 'Harmony with Humanity: Islam and Non-Muslims,' SpiritualPerception.org.
[21] Khan MN. 'Top Five Misquotations of the Qur'an,' SpiritualPerception.org.
[22] See the discussion under "When Muslim Men and Women express a desire for Sharia, what do they mean?" in *Who Speaks for Islam* by Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, pp. 52–63 wherein they elucidate why this point is crucial for interpreting any data about Muslim attitudes.

of human life, faith, intellect, wealth, and family.[23] It represents a holistic approach to increasing prosperity in society. *Shari'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. *Fiqh* is dynamic and constantly evolving, changing with time and place.[24] Importantly, the human interpretation of *shari'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 H) articulated,

> *The Shari'ah is entirely justice, compassion, wisdom, and prosperity. Therefore, any ruling that replaces justice with injustice, mercy with cruelty, prosperity with harm, or wisdom with nonsense, is a ruling that does not belong to the Shari'ah, even if it is claimed to be so according to some interpretations.*[25]

To militant groups (and unfortunately, thanks to the media, pretty much everyone else as well), *shari'ah* refers to just a set of criminal punishments known as the *hudood*. In fact, the 2013 Pew polls[26] 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 *hudood* and the 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)

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[23] Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (d.790 H), *al-Muwafaqat*, vol. 1, p. 38.

[24] 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 H) notes that a significant portion of Abu Hanifah's (d.150 H) jurisprudence was changed by his students Abu Yusuf (d.182 H) and Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani (d.189 H), and that this change was not due to disagreement over sacred texts but simply because of the changing circumstances of society with time (*al-Mabsut* vol. 8, p. 178). If so many of the rulings related to societal issues (*mu'amalat*) changed in one generation, there is even greater need to re-evaluate and contextualize rulings in the post-industrial age. This will be further elucidated in a forthcoming article on the role of pre-modern Malthusian economics in contextualizing the discourse of the medieval jurists, God willing.

[25] Ibn al-Qayyim, *I'lam al-Muwaqi'een* vol. 4, 337, Dar Ibn al-Jawzi 1st ed.

[26] *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics, and Society* (April 30, 2013). The Pew Research Center.

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 many 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.[27] 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.[28]

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 *shari'ah* law were actually *more* likely to support the death penalty for apostasy (95.7%), as compared to those who were in favor of *shari'ah* law (86.3%).[29] 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

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[27] See, for example, al-Sarakhsi (d. 490 H) Burhan al-Din al-Hanafi (d. 616 H), Ibn al-Sa'ati (d. 694 H), Abu'l-Barakat al-Nasafi (d. 710 H). Ibn al-Humam (d. 861 H), in *Fath al-Qadeer*, explicitly explains the reasoning to relate to capacity to fight against Muslims (vol. 5, p. 311). 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-mufariqu li'l-jama'ah* (*Sahih Bukhari*).

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

[29] The numbers from the Pew poll are accurately cited here with confirmation from James Bell of the research center itself: 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.

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.[30]

Coming back to the issue of those corporal punishments that are apparently 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.[31] These laws are subject to lengthy discussion in the books of Islamic jurisprudence which place upon them such stringent conditions as to render their application essentially obsolete[32]—and this is precisely in line with the Prophet ﷺ's emphasis on the *hudood* serving primarily as psychological deterrents and encouraging his followers *not* to apply them when he said,

> *Ward off the hudood 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.*[33]

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[30] As discussed in *Who Speaks for Islam* by John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, pp. 73–74.

[31] An overview of some of the diverse perspectives and debates on this topic can be found in "*Strategies for the justifications of Hudud Allah and their punishments in the Islamic tradition*'', AlSoufi RHA. (PhD dissertation University of Edinburgh 2012).

[32] Al-Kasani, *Badaa'i al-Sanaa'i*, vol. 9, p. 250.

[33] *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*. 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).

Suffice it to say, discussions on *shari'ah* are far more intricate and nuanced in the Muslim scholastic community in stark contrast to the distorted presentation of *shari'ah* by Islamophobes, the media, as well as by violent groups.

## The media and public representation of Islam

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 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 one-and-a-half 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, right? Human beings are simple creatures after all, and the tragic result of this constant bombardment of ISLAM = VIOLENCE has been 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", etc.— the only common denominator in these titles and the word that everyone will remember is, of course, simply Islam. In fact, this was plainly illustrated during the 2016 United States presidential election when Donald Trump's campaign manager boasted of his "Five-point plan to defeat Islam," which she later chalked up to a "slip of the tongue."[34] This begs the question—why would you insist on using terminology that allows you, with just a slip of the tongue, to declare war on and criminalize a faith community of 1.6 billion? Why would anyone insist on using labels that—with a slip of the tongue—mistake their allies for their enemies?

The fallacy and the harm of labeling violent movements as representations of Islam are evident. Even worse, however, is that the faith community of 1.6 billion Muslims has been surreptitiously presented as 'fake Muslims,' as it is subtly (and

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[34] https://thinkprogress.org/conway-trump-defeat-islam-36e37c212358.

sometimes not so subtly[35] suggested that they are following an Islam that is not as authentic or *literal* in following scripture. This assumption that 'literalism = radicalism,' though widespread, is in fact academically unfounded.[36] 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 (Qur'an 2:190) must be understood figuratively in the broadest sense possible to make every human being on this earth complicit in the 'global war on Islam.' 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."[37]

Terrorists 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.[38] Far

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[35] 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, the only Muslims who aren't violent are fake Muslims who aren't actually practicing the tenets of their faith. This fallacious reasoning is dealt with in greater detail here (*The Tactics of Bigotry*, Khan MN, SpiritualPerception.org).

[36] 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." (Robinson, *Islamic Civilization in Thirty Lives: The First 1,000 Years*. 2016, p. 211).

[37] October 21, 2001 interview with Al-Jazeera correspondent Tayseer Alouni.

[38] 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: 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.

from being interested in literal interpretations, terrorist movements demonstrate blatant disregard for any instruction of scripture that proves inconvenient to their political interests.

## 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 violent political movements? What factors influenced the growth of terrorist 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 and violence?

A wide survey of contemporary and historical cases would suggest to us that the emergence and proliferation of violent 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.[39]

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[39] 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.
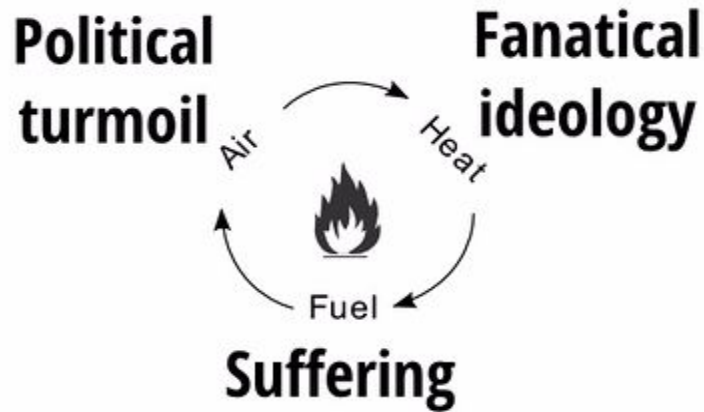
*Figure 1: Like a combustion-triangle, three key factors are required for the emergence and proliferation of violent movements.*

Like a fire that requires air, fuel, and heat, all three of the aforementioned elements are vital ingredients in the proliferation of violent 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.*[40]

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[40] Toby Craig Jones. America, Oil, and War. *Middle East Journal of American History* 2012 99: 208–218.

After decades of living under oppressive regimes and sanctions (which killed 227,000 Iraqi children between 1991–1998),[41] the situation went from bad to worse 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.[42] 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.[43] 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 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.[44] In the most extreme of situations, where carnage has been witnessed on a daily basis, the human mind becomes horribly disfigured, permitting the most immoral and unconscionable of deeds. In the Nazi massacres of Jews, Kapo concentration camps turned victims of savagery into perpetrators. In the case of the African American slave rebellion of Nat Turner in the US, women and children were killed to spread "terror and alarm"—victims of the brutality of slavery became themselves caught up in indiscriminate violence.

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

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[41] Richard Garfield. *Morbidity and Mortality Among Iraqi Children from 1990 Through 1998: Assessing the Impact of the Gulf War and Economic Sanctions.*
[42] Gilbert Burnham et al. Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey. *The Lancet*, Volume 368, Issue 9545, 1421–1428.
[43] https://raniakhalek.com/2013/03/20/u-s-turns-a-blind-eye-to-iraqi-birth-defects-worse-than-hiroshima/.
[44] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/11041338/The-science-behind-Isils-savagery.html.

government succeeded in alienating a diverse range of groups through its brutal persecution of opponents. Moreover, the former military forces of Saddam Hussein's regime played a critical role in the ensuing developments.

The New York Times reported in August 2014 that many of the leading generals in ISIS were former military officers of Saddam Hussein's regime.[45] 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 and to forge a new organization with a new ideology.[46]

Criminals, soldiers, fanatics, rebels came together and this local unholy alliance led to the formation of the modern terrorist group known as ISIS. The 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 brought up in strongly religious households, and there is a higher than*

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[45] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/28/world/middleeast/army-know-how-seen-as-factor-in-isis-successes.html?r=0.

[46] Tønnessen, Truls Hallberg, "Heirs of Zarqawi or Saddam? The relationship between al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State," *Perspectives On Terrorism,* vol. 9, No. 4, August 2015.

*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.*[47]

# Ideological analysis of violent movements—How Islam was morphed by extremists into a mythology of violence

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.[48] 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.*[49]

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[47] Alan Travis. MI5 report challenges views on terrorism in Britain, *The Guardian*, August 20, 2008. https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/aug/20/uksecurity.terrorism1.

[48] 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)." (Marranci, G. *Understanding Muslim Identity—Rethinking Fundamentalism*. 2008. P. 21).

[49] Ibid. p. 58.

Many pundits and polemicists perseverate on the religion of Islam itself, failing to differentiate between the Islam of mainstream Muslims and the particular ideological doctrines developed by criminal organizations that set them apart from the vast majority of Islamic 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 religious doctrines that drive 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.[50] 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 dismantle secular rule. This rhetoric was later seized by extremists who combined it with a doctrine of universal and perpetual conflict against all non-Islamic governance.[51]

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[50] Milton-Edwards offers a perspective on how this tension has shaped many of the modern movements in her book, *Islamic Fundamentalism since 1945* (2005).

[51] For instance, Sayyid Qutb's explanation of the term *jahiliyyah* (un-Islamic ignorance) as 'the rule of people by other people' is sometimes used to support the notion that Islam is antithetical to other civilizations and cannot coexist with non-Islamic governments (William Shepard. Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of *Jahiliyya*. *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* vol. 35, no 4, pp. 521–545). While terrorists are keen to exploit such ideas, others argue that Qutb's writings must be understood in the context of opposing a repressive regime, and point to his

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 revived in the modern world. As emotions superseded reason, the rhetoric became increasingly more extreme and distant from the teachings of Islam.

In 1996, Bin Laden issued a call for *jihad* 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.[52] Articulating grievances shared by Muslims around the world, Bin Laden expanded his reach and appeal, but in sanctioning attacks on civilians, he explicitly violated the ethical code of Islam. 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, even this was abandoned in favor of 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 gradual ideological evolution culminated in a cult steeped in a mythology of violence.

So what are the characteristic components of the ideology that defines modern-day groups like ISIS? Their mythology may be summarized as comprising five key pillars: 1) Caliphal Utopianism; 2) Dehumanization in the name of *Walaa' wal-Baraa'*; 3) *Takfeerism*; 4) Totalitarian *Jihad*; and 5) Apocalypticism.

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advocacy of human rights which terrorists ignore; Sayyid Qutb wrote, "Forced religious conversion is the worst violation of a most inviolable human right…freedom of belief is man's most precious right in this world and ought to be cherished and protected." (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, English translation of *Fi Zilal al Quran*, vol. 1, p. 212). Adil Salahi, the translator of Qutb into English, comments on the extremist use of Qutb's writings, "It may be said, perhaps with some justification, that Sayyid Qutb was a bit too strong in his argument, providing a platform for extremism to stand on. Here we find ourselves trying to answer the question: to what extent may a writer be blamed for being misunderstood by his readers? In the case of Sayyid Qutb, the overwhelming majority of his readers maintain that he reflects the middle path Islam adopts" (vol. 7, xii) and "terrorism was as hateful to [Sayyid Qutb] as it was to any fair minded person who values justice and freedom as basic human rights" (vol. 8, xv).
[52] https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Osama_bin_Laden%27s_Declaration_of_War.

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

## The Utopian *'Khilafah'*

A critical feature of many militant movements is the fantasy of creating a perfect society in the Muslim world today by re-establishing the '*khilafah.*' But what is the *khilafah*?

The *khilafah* (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 ambiguous given that the term *khilafah* has been applied to those voluntarily selected by the community (such as during the time of the first four 'Rightly Guided Caliphs') as well as hereditary kingship (like the Umayyads and most Muslim dynasties), as well 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 *khilafah* 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, Islamic versus secular governance, and popular sovereignty (for a review and bibliography of such works refer to Andrew F. March, *Political Islam: Theory*, 2015). Crucially, militant movements are unconcerned with articulating any coherent political system of government, as what matters to them is the mere symbolic value, the mere surface image, of *khilafah*.

The word *khilafah* 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

pronouncement of the word *khilafah*, 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.[53] Islamic scholars have articulated that the defining element in a Muslim nation is that justice and security are established.[54] The ruler is to be the *wakeel* (representative) and *khadim* (servant) of the people, not their overlord.[55] The situation of Muslim lands will not be rectified without the re-introduction of such ethical principles of governance.

## Dehumanization in the name of *Walaa' wal-Baraa'*

The term *Walaa' wal-Baraa'* (lit. loyalty and disavowal) is a term used by Muslim theologians to refer to maintaining an affinity towards all that which is virtuous and loved by God, while seeking to dissociate oneself from matters which are immoral and odious to God. However, warped in the minds of militants, this concept has become a 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. Framing the world into a conflict of "*us versus them*," they dehumanize the outsider and demonstrate no concern for his or her well-being. Any Muslim befriending or maintaining positive relations with non-Muslims is seen as a traitor, and therefore included amongst the evildoers as well. But this is again 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

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[53] Ibn al-Qayyim (d.751H) 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" (*Turuq al-Hukmiyyah fi Siyasah al-Shar'iyyah*, p.11).

[54] Imam Abu Hanifah (d.150H): "The purpose (*maqsud*) of calling a certain land `Land of Islam' or land of disbelief (*kufr*), is not about Islam or *kufr*. It is about security versus insecurity" (cited in *Bada'i al-Sana'i* of Al-Kasani).

[55] For a concise overview, see the discussion on this topic in *Fiqh al-Thawrah* (2013) by Dr. Ahmad al-Raysuni, pp. 22-27.

Muslims and non-Muslims, as demonstrated by his involvement in the pledge known as *Hilf al-Fudul* (an agreement of several clans in Mecca to protect anyone who was oppressed). The Prophet ﷺ demonstrated respect and appreciation for non-Muslims like Mut'im ibn Adi 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 (*Sahih Ibn Hibban*). The Qur'an is very clear (9:60) that a goal of Islam, even *zakat* 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 (*Kanz al-Ummal*).

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).

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).

## *Takfeer* Absolutism

A central dogma of violent movements is the excommunication of any Muslim who disagrees with their principles. In Arabic, this is called *takfeer*—the practice of pronouncing someone to be a *kaafir* (disbeliever). 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,

> *Whoever accuses his brother of disbelief is instead himself guilty* (Sahih Bukhari).

This practice of *takfeer* was a characteristic feature of an early heretical group in Islamic history known as the Khawarij. The Khawarij fought against even the Prophet ﷺ's companions, so self-assured were they of their own religiosity and purity. 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.

*Takfeer* 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 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.

> *Permission to fight is granted to those who are being fought because they have been oppressed, and verily God is capable of granting them victory; those who were driven from their homes for no reason other than professing their faith in God as their Lord. And had God not granted people the ability to defend themselves against others it would have resulted in the destruction of churches, synagogues, monasteries, and mosques.* (Qur'an 22:39–40)

## Totalitarian *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* (Musnad Ahmad).

The Qur'an does have a concept of physical *jihad* as well—the legitimate and just exercise of military force when it is done to ward off enemy attacks (Qur'an 22:39) and to rescue others from oppression (Qur'an 4:75). The Qur'an does not permit violence against civilians or anyone not engaged in combat against the Muslims (2:190).

But to the architects of violent movements, this is the most precious of all weapons. *Jihad* signifies to them a perpetual cosmic conflict between good and evil, and they ardently maintain that the relation between Muslims and non-Muslims must always be characterized by perpetual violence and bloodshed

until the apocalypse.[56] They totally disregard the Prophetic emphasis placed on establishing peace, as in the treaty of Hudaybiyyah, 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 2:192)

These movements argue that violent upheaval is 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

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[56] In order to substantiate this notion, recourse is often made to the works of medieval 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 H) and others, was actually the security of Muslim lands living under the constant threat of foreign invasion (Jackson S. Jihad and the Modern World. *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture*. vol 7 (1) p. 17). 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.

trigger a final battle between good and evil at Dabiq (the town after which they have 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 more women.

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—slavery is condemned in Islam. The Prophet ﷺ said that on Judgment Day the one who enslaves a free person will have to contend with God as his adversary (*Sahih Bukhari*), 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 most authoritative interpretation of the *hadith* being alluded to ("A slave will give birth to her master")[57] suggests that it refers to an increase in negative attitudes of youth towards their parents.

## 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" (*al-Tabarani*). 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 the greatest civilizations in history, and it is a way of life that is dear to a fifth of the world's population today.

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[57] Ibn Hajar al-`Asqalani (d.852H) in *Fath al-Bari* (1/122). See also the alternate view in al-Qastallani's *Irshad al-Sari* and al-Kashmiri's *Fayd al-Bari* that it is a linguistic device referring to the general reversal of affairs.

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 use the hatred of criminal organizations abroad to 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:

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.

Islam represents a global faith community of 1.6 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.

Violent 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.

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.

There is a particular set of doctrines that sets these violent movements 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. This is the *only* way solve the problem: by isolating militant rhetoric and stripping it of any claims to Islamic legitimacy.

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.