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Editorial

Un-Islamic or Non-Muslim: The Identity of Violent Extremist Elements among Muslims

The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. *Very* Islamic. Yes, it has attracted psychopaths and adventure seekers, drawn largely from the disaffected populations of the Middle East and Europe. But the religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam.”¹

This editorial analyzes the phenomenon of violent extremism and its identification and association with Islam by analysts and critics. In my 29:1 editorial “The Stigma of Extremism on Muslims,” I suggested that the violent elements in Islam are no more than “a fraction of the 7 percent of global Muslim population considered to be ‘politically radicalized,’ including [non-violent] sympathizers”² and “an inescapable nuisance and ... regrettable stigma [to] the larger Muslim majority.”³ I stand by these points, the iteration of which, in this current editorial, gains its prime relevance.

Here, I argue further that despite the Prophet’s prohibition of labeling other self-confessed practicing Muslims as “non-Muslims”⁴ regardless of their actions (i.e., *takfir*), extremists nevertheless use it to give themselves the license to kill other Muslims, a fact that makes their actions “un-Islamic.” I also maintain that the peace-loving Muslim majority has the moral right and intellectual prerogative to denounce this violent minority and to get their denunciation appreciated and deemed supreme.

Islamic or Un-Islamic?

The question of whether al-Qaida, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and IS are Islamic or un-Islamic is politically and religiously significant. Although the importance of these descriptions is great to all actors (e.g., violent extremists, peace-

loving Muslims, and the non-Muslim global community), it may be of even greater importance to these groups, for their entire *raison d'être* is firmly anchored in their "Islamicness." They came to existence as groups; they are who they are and do what they do based on their self-image. Without this self-claimed self-image, they could only see themselves and their activities as worthless – as they, in fact, truly are. So to depict them differently, as we do here, would be the greatest of all possible insults.

The peace-loving Muslim majority's depiction of violent extremists and their activities as un-Islamic is both a religio-political necessity and self-serving. The first attitude is both correct and justified, for it is un-Islamic to line up and execute other Muslims indiscriminately, even if they do happen to belong to another sect, regardless of what some isolated medieval source says.⁵ It is un-Islamic to burn Muslims alive, behead non-Muslim social workers helping Muslims, abduct hundreds of mainly young Muslim girls to be sold and abused in unlawful marriages, and kill innocent students. But this same majority is fully justified in portraying violent extremists and their activities as un-Islamic because the latter claim to be doing everything in the name of Islam and for Muslims. Unfortunately, some people around the world agree with them and bash Muslims and Islam.

Each time I give a public talk to non-Muslims in this country, I am asked why Muslims sympathize with "terrorists." The underlying rationale always seems to be based on the erroneously and ill-informed observations that Muslims, as a whole, neither challenge nor protest such activities. Once an elderly and seemingly open-minded liberal told me that he would like to see a large crowd of Muslims demonstrate, like African-Americans did in Washington during the 1995 "Million Man March."⁶

As far as blaming Islam, this is mainly done by various analysts, pundits, Islamophobes, and even well-intentioned academics. Those in the first two groups openly blame Islam for these activities; those in the latter two groups read such activities into Islamic sources or attempt to prove the extremists' loyalty to Islamic sources, no matter how minority or isolated those sources are. This way, Graeme Wood and others like him project violent extremists as "very Islamic." Note that his above-mentioned quote states that "the reality is that Islamic State is Islamic. *Very* Islamic... the religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam." He acknowledges the truth by using *interpretation* instead of *scriptures*, but skews it by using *coherent* and saying nothing of *majority* interpretations.

To me, the latter approach is more sinister. Ironically, these intellectuals and pseudo-experts feel comfortable agreeing with the violent extremists than with the majority of peace-loving Muslims. Thus they distrust any attempt to

discredit the extremists. I was once invited to an interfaith dialogue at Chapman University's Department of Religious Studies on "The Similarities between Judaism and Islam." I said nothing about extremism, and yet spent the entire Q&A session answering questions about al-Qaida and Hamas, even Iran, all the while trying to convince the audience that all of the extremists' purported justifications are either distortions or misunderstandings. One gentleman, who claimed to be a "real" American conservative and had no association with the department (he later sent me a link to his conservative blog), stated that he would never accept the "usual" Muslims' explanation of misunderstanding and distortion on the part of the extremists. What else could I have said?

Thus their hatred of Islam and/or distrust of Muslims allows them to partially absolve the extremists or down-play their responsibility in order to establish (via selective readings and research) Islam's inherently evil nature. The basis of their conclusion is this. As long as there is a trace of one medieval extremist on a particular issue, one whose opinion can be unearthed correctly, out of context, or perhaps erroneously by either today's extremists or the analysts themselves, the Muslim scholars' majority rulings just do not matter.

My own research on the interpretation of the Qur'an's peace verses confirms the extremists' selective use of sources and the superiority of the majority's comprehensive approach. Consider the following verses: "But if they incline towards peace, then you must also incline towards it and put your trust in God: He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing. If, however, they intend to deceive you, then God is enough for you..." (Q. 8:61-62).

On the surface, Muslims must seek peace as long as their opponents do the same. Qatadah ibn Di'amah (d. 735) is reported to have claimed that these verses were abrogated by a later revelation: "wherever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post" (Q. 9:5).⁷ The tragic implication of this abrogation theory is that Muslims must fight non-Muslims until the latter are annihilated. One can see how convenient this is to any violent extremist. Qatadah related this theory in his book, but only in one-and-a-half lines and without any further elaboration about the context or occasion for the alleged abrogating war verse. Significantly, this particular book is not a *tafsir* that explains and contextualizes the revelations or offers different opinions, but only a listing of abrogating and abrogated verses (*al-nāsikh wa al-mansūkh*).

Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), an alleged ideologue for modern extremists and himself a Qur'anic commentator, accepted this particular case of abrogation because it fits in perfectly with his activist (read "extremist") sentiments.⁸ Of course, today's extremists who use his ideas would not only easily follow his opinion, but would also proudly refer to Qatadah and thereby justify their ac-

tivities by original classical sources. Journalists and analysts like Graeme Wood would consider those justifications and actions “very Islamic” simply because they are based on the “coherent and even learned interpretation of Islam.”

After citing Qatadah’s theory of abrogation in the contexts of these peace verses, and probing the context and occasion of revelation of the alleged abrogating war verse, al-Tabari swiftly rejected the theory as “baseless,” adding, “not according to the [context of the] Qur’an, the Sunnah, or even common sense (*fiṭrat ‘aql*).”⁹

Qur’an commentator and Maliki jurist Abu Bakr ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 1148) argues that the abrogation conclusion in this context is nothing but a mere “claim” (*da‘wa*).¹⁰ Fakhr al-Razi (d. 1210), a Qur’anic commentator and theologian with philosophical acumen (based on his voluminous *tafsīr*), both dismisses this theory and insists that Muslims must accept peace “even if they (the opponents) sought it as a way of deception (*‘alā sabīl al-mukhāda‘ah*).”¹¹ The majority of modern Qur’an commentators, including former Tunisian grand mufti Muhammad al-Tahir ibn ‘Ashur (d. 1973), overwhelmingly agree that the peace verses are meant for perpetual application.

Finally, to buttress this majority opinion, the Prophet himself applied them in 628 at al-Hudaybiyyah in response to God’s command. Not ironically, and despite Umar ibn al-Khattab’s protest of the treaty’s obviously unfavorable stipulations to Muslims, the Prophet told him that “I am a servant of God and His messenger. I will never disobey His command (*amrah*), nor will He ever abandon me (*wa lan yuhayyi ‘anī*).”¹²

In his commentary on the peace verses, Sayyid Qutb selectively cited Qatadah’s opinion and ignored not only the other medieval commentators (i.e., al-Tabari, Ibn al-‘Arabi, Fakhr al-Razi), but also effectively disregarded the verses’ application at Hudaybiyyah. Why? This is surely one of his attempts to drive home his ideological position, and contemporary extremist groups follow suit. And yet after all this, some contemporary journalists still consider such groups as “very Islamic” based upon these isolated sources.

Clearly, extremists selectively consult sources to deliberately skew the Islamic message in their own favor and/or to mislead others in their efforts to represent “true Islam,” regardless of whether their audiences comprise like-minded potential recruits or journalist claiming to uncover the truth. Based on the above case study, the peace-loving Muslim majority has a better argument morally, religiously and politically than does the un-Islamic extremist minority. And it is therefore high time that the pseudo-analysts stop bolstering the extremists’ case and ego in the name objective and unbiased analysis.

This Issue

We begin this issue with “Qur’anic Methodology for Integrating Knowledge and Education: Implications for Malaysia’s Islamic Education Strategy” by Sidek Bin Baba, Mohamad Johdi Salleh, Tareq M. Zayed, and Ridwan Harris. In this study, the authors develop a teacher-centered Qur’anic methodology based on integrating acquired and revealed knowledge as regards content. They also investigate the existing curriculum and institutional efforts to integrate both types of knowledge, students’ understanding of the integrated knowledge and its learning process, as well as how the teachers and lecturers understand and then apply this integrated knowledge to their teaching methods.

Next is Nuraan Davids’ “Islam and Multiculturalism in Europe: An Exposition of a Dialectical Encounter.” Davids explores why its multiculturalism might be perceived as failing. In weighing the increasing levels of fear and insecurity among majority groups within a context of growing social marginalization among minority groups, she suggests reinvoking multiculturalism as a dialectical encounter on the grounds that this will lead to the equal citizenship necessary to counter the alienation and skepticism that threaten to undermine any notion of peaceful co-existence.

Mahdi Shafieyan follows with his “Derrida’s Shadow in the Light of Islamic Studies: An Analysis of Binary Relations in the Qur’an.” His study reveals the problems accompanying the conception of the binary pair and offers alternatives. He does not mean to reject the binary pair itself; however, underlining this idea in a way that obstructs other paths are questioned and some supplementary notions for the binary opposition and binary pair are proposed.

We close with “Striving for Islamic Governance: Varying Contexts, Different Strategies” by Abdul Rashid Moten. He analyzes the attempts made by specific leaders in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the secular Republic of Turkey, and multi-ethnic Malaysia to improve their governance models in the areas of human, economic, and social development. Moten maintain that as these countries adopted different strategies, the resultant models of Islamic governance are due largely to the contexts and features of their respective societies. He concludes that Turkey and Malaysia largely embraced democratic principles, operated a new hybrid economic model that combined the characteristics of Islamic and capitalist market systems, and worked closely with the West.

I hope that our readers will find these papers not only thought-provoking and stimulating, but also sources of inspiration and motivation for their own research.

Endnotes

1. Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>, retrieved on April 4, 2015.
2. John Esposito and Dalia Mugahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007) 69-70.
3. Zakyi Ibrahim, "The Stigma of Extremism on Muslims," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 29, no. 1 (2012): i.
4. Muhammad Ibn Isma'il, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukārī* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 2006), "Kitāb al-Adab," chapter 73, hadith nos. 6103-04.
5. I challenge any analyst to prove that any of their sources has ever been the majority voice or consensus of Muslims scholars, even in their own era. It is hardly difficult to identify scholarly and methodologically sounder voices on that particular case.
6. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the "Million Man March, political demonstration in Washington, DC, on Oct. 16, 1995, to promote African American unity and family values. Estimates of the number of marchers, most of whom were African American men, ranged from 400,000 to nearly 1.1 million, ranking it among the largest gatherings of its kind in American history," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/382949/Million-Man-March>; retrieved on April 4, 2015).
7. Qatadah ibn Di'amah, *Kitāb al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1984) 42.
8. Sayyid Qutb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, 8:61, p. 184, <https://www.mosshaf.com/ar/main>, retrieved on April 7, 2015.
9. Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* (n.p.: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 2000), 14: 41-42.
10. Muhammad al-Tahir 'bn 'Ashur, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Tarikh, 2000), 9: 149.
11. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2000), 15:150.
12. Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham, *Al-Sīrat al-Nabawīyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 2006), 3-4:196.

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