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Revisiting Fanaticism in the Context of *Wasaṭīyyah*¹

Fanaticism is derived from the Latin word *fanum*, which refers to sacred places of worship such as temples or other consecrated sites. The complete term *fanaticus* means “to be put into raging enthusiasm by a deity.”² In the modern sense, a fanatic is simply an individual who goes to an extreme, is overly zealous or unreasonably enthusiastic regarding an issue, idea, opinion, or action. These ideations do not have to be of a strictly religious nature, but may also be in regard to a personal or private matter or a larger political, social, or economic issue. Despite the broadness of its contemporary application, it is most commonly used in its traditional sense of religious zealotry, intolerance, and violence.

In today’s literature fanaticism stands not for the content of any particular religious position, but for a mentality and attitude that can attach an attitude of radicalism, rigor, and extremism to the content of any ideal or ideology. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, it refers to a person “holding extreme beliefs that may lead to unreasonable (actions) or violent behavior.”³ One feature of this mentality is the “religious assurance of the establishment of belief through dogmatic and moral legalism, often founded on a fundamentalist positivism in matters touching revelation.”⁴

“Fundamentalism” (*uṣūlīyah*), on the other hand, is originally a Protestant term developed in the early part of the twentieth century to refer to Christian groups that believed in the Bible’s inerrancy, as opposed to those who sought to make scriptural changes to accommodate the modern world.⁵ It is somewhat redundant in the Islamic context; however, some scholars have been trying to understand the connection between Islam and fundamentalism.⁶ Theoretically, the great majority of practicing Muslims are “fundamentalists” because they believe that the Qur’an remains unchanged from its initial revelation. Therefore, the following analysis will mainly focus on the concepts of fanaticism and *wasaṭīyyah* from a comparative perspective that emphasizes their recent developments and connections to Islam.

One would be hard pressed to paint a picture of the typical fanatic, for fanaticism transcends all racial, geographical, linguistic, and religious boundaries. The objectives, goals, methodology, interests, and motivations of fanatics are as diverse as the means employed and the results achieved. A fanatic may operate in isolation or join a group of like-minded individuals. Even nation-states have been known to engage in fanatical behavior. Given this apparent diversity, do any similarities exist in the characteristics, behavior, and actions of fanatics? In his *Terrorist Myths* Peter Sederberg classifies terrorists according to their ideological commitments.⁷ A similar classification can be made of fanatics who may or may not be involved in terroristic activities, which is defined as “the use of violence to achieve a political or social goal.”⁸

Some fanatics are no more than criminals, for they seek not to change the established order so much as to penetrate it and then use it for deviant ends. Other fanatics are nihilists who desire to destroy the established order just for the sake of destruction; they do not seek to replace it with something better. Individuals with destructive pathologies, such as armed individuals who shoot others at random as well as many contemporary cultic movements, fall into this category. Others can be classified as single-issue social activists who are extremely committed to various issues (e.g., nuclear disarmament, the environment, abortion, and animal rights). Although mere membership in them does not make one a fanatic, many such groups have been known to use extreme measures to get their message across.

One example of an issue-oriented group is Christian Identity, which operates largely in the American Midwest and has no love for the federal government. During the 1980s its members set off bombs, robbed banks, and raided National Guard armouries⁹ in attempts to show their dissatisfaction with Washington’s policies. Another fundamentalist but not necessarily fanatical group that appears to be more involved in recent politics are “Born Again Christians.” It has been confirmed that

During the American presidential election in 2004, “Born Again” Christians played a decisive role in the re-election of former president George W. Bush. Polls revealed that thirty percent of those US voters regarded themselves as belonging to this movement.¹⁰

Other fanatics have a nationalistic bent that appeals to significant segments of disgruntled people among both the minority and majority populations. The Basque ETA (Spain), the IRA (Northern Ireland), and various Palestinian organizations fall into this category, for most cannot exist without the support of their respective populations.¹¹ Those fanatics who have a revolutionary agenda

advocate a program of social transformation that transcends the particular concerns of any state constituency in order to encompass the much larger “global” community. These are the most feared because they threaten the established order of the existing powers. One infamous ideology that falls into this category is communism, which has now become a spent force.

As mentioned above, states are not exempt from engaging in such behavior, the most extreme of which is genocide or the attempted elimination a certain ethno-religious group(s) that has been identified as undesirable for one reason or another. The most recent example of such an atrocity is the fanatical behavior of the Syrian government, which has been attempting to exterminate its Muslim co-citizens while the world watches helplessly.

The extent of the influence possessed by these fanatical groups or states is often subject to available financial resources, the group’s organizational capacity, and the publicity and hence awareness generated about them. However, now that we have some idea as to their diversity, the next question is how to determine if an individual, group, or nation is fanatical or is engaging in such obsessive behavior? In other words, what are the criteria for establishing whether or not an individual or group has extreme opinions, ideas, and actions? It is quite difficult to answer this question, given that all moral action and behavior is relative as long as it does not harm or infringe upon another individual’s personal freedom and liberty. Nevertheless, in spite of this general principle there is no broad application of the precept, particularly when it involves relations between and among nations. At this level, any action that harms or injures a state or group within a state may be justified as long as it serves the larger community’s interest.

The problem with moral relativism is that it reduces fanaticism to a matter of personal perception and, as such, involves immense subjectivities. Not surprisingly, there has been appreciable use and abuse of the term based upon one’s often ideological and political motivations. For example, the media frequently refer to Muslims struggling in a few “hot spots” as “fanatics,” irrespective of the historical roots of these conflicts and motivations, as well as the rationales and purposes of the diverse activities undertaken by the indigenous groups. This label is habitually utilized because these groups are Muslims (mainly Arabs) fighting for causes that run contrary to the dominant international geopolitical interests. The content of the mass media, and nowadays of the social media, is therefore manufactured by “a scholarship of oversimplification that informs the West about Islam.”¹²

Painting all Muslim activist groups with the same brush only undermines and belittles the causes of many of these groups and further impedes the pub-

lic's ability to comprehend all sides of the conflict. Consequently, "fanatic" perpetuates ignorance instead of encouraging an investigation that will lead to a more informed understanding of each side's perspectives. Regarding the recent "war on terror," John Esposito illustrates this position by citing a common question:

Why do they (Muslims) hate us? The common answer from Washington is that Muslim radicals hate our (Western) way of life, our freedom and our democracy. Not so. Both moderates and radicals in the Muslim world admire the West, in particular its technology, democratic system and freedom of speech.¹³

The Causes of Fanaticism

The causes of fanatical behavior are quite diverse: private and personal, a larger socio-political goal, or no goal at all beyond the act itself. For some psycho-social analysts, fanaticism is a strictly psychological issue – someone with a personality disorder that makes him or her highly susceptible to fanatical behavior.¹⁴ Consequently, fanatics need to be cured of this particular dementia or confined in such a way that they cannot harm others. Reducing fanaticism to a clinical issue has received its own share of criticism, for such an analysis fails to acknowledge that individual personalities do not develop in a vacuum. Rather, individuals are the products of their upbringing and the politico-socio-economic environment in which they live. To focus on the personality disorder issue is to dismiss the problem, because the insane have no credibility and their actions and ideas gain no recognition in the political process.¹⁵

The role of the family in shaping the fanatic's personality, identity, and characteristics should not be underestimated. Individuals who are raised in healthy families with strong moral values and guidance, as well as with a great deal of love and affection, often develop a positive self-identity that may steer them away from fanatical paths. Conversely, families in which individuals receive scant care and attention, in which divorce, violence, abuse or extra-judicial death or manslaughter have occurred, may negatively impact individuals' growth and self-esteem. Such realities may also influence them toward a path of fanaticism and extremism.

The social environment in which one lives plays a strong role in developing an individual's identity. The socio-economic status of one's family, the religious and/or educational institutions attended, whether the individual lives as a part of a minority or majority group, and whether a person experiences racism or discrimination are all factors that may influence a fanatic's behavior.

Another very influential factor is the surrounding political environment. The extent to which an individual possesses basic political rights and freedoms, such as the right to influence and participate in the political process or to express an opinion and be heard, often affects one's behavior. The more one perceives one's society to be secure, fair, and just, and the more that the society in question accommodates one's interests and opinions, the less one may be inclined toward fanatical behavior. On the contrary, the perception that one's society is insecure, unjust and replete with inequality, corruption, and repression may create a widespread sense of frustration that, in turn, may lead those affected to engage in extremist behavior and actions in an effort to bring attention to their plight.

Adding these qualifiers to the contemporary global political scenario magnifies the possible causes of fanaticism. This attitude is further qualified by how one perceives the (mis)representation of the interests of his or her community or nation on the international stage, for this often affects one's identity and psychological development as well. A fanatic's behavior may also be influenced by other perceptions: Whether the person perceives his or her community and/or nation to be influential or powerless, the extent to which people can influence their own destiny and foreign policy, and whether or not they have to depend upon other nations for their own domestic economic development, political stability, and decision-making.

For example, the West's current political, economic, and cultural global domination often triggers potential fanatics in non-western countries who feel that their own identity, culture, and power are being threatened. Many of them resent the western powers' meddling in the internal affairs of some Muslim states via the media, technology, their military presence, economic and political sanctions, and so on.

The "Islamicity" of Fanaticism

Contemporary Muslim scholars frequently have difficulties defining fanaticism, for this concept did not exist in the early Islamic tradition, literature, and scholarship. But several terms did convey certain aspects of it as it is known today in western literature. One such example is *'aṣabīyah* or *ta'aṣṣub* (excessive love of one's tribe), which was very common during the pre-Islamic era and later developed into what Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) defined as "group feeling."¹⁶ Even today, in the Iraqi dialect, a hot-tempered individual is often referred to as *'aṣabī*. Other Arabic terms linked with fanaticism are *ighāl* (beyond exaggeration),¹⁷ *tashaddud* (exceedingly restrictive),¹⁸ *gulūw* (excessiveness),¹⁹

and *taṭarruf* (moving to the farthest edge of a spectrum of opinions or attitudes); some scholars even include *taṣawwuf* (mystical experience).²⁰

While social scientists have no well-defined criteria for determining at which point an individual's behavior or actions can be considered fanatical, Muslims have been given the "criterion" for determining appropriate moral action and behavior. Accordingly, when they wish to determine which source should be used for judging such things they first look to the Qur'an and then to the Sunnah (i.e., the Prophet's words and deeds as reported through the authentic traditions).

Like other major world religions, Islam is a religion of peace and moderation that encourages its followers to avoid extravagance and excess. The Qur'an addresses the global Muslim community as a "justly balanced" (Q. 2:143) *ummah*. The *tafsīr* (commentary) on this verse tells us that Islam came to moderate the ways of the previous nations, which had become either extremely legalistic (i.e., lacking in spirit) or far too "other-worldly."²¹ It appears that Qur'an was revealed to bring humanity back to the straight path of monotheism and that of moderation in all spheres of life.

Muslims are advised to balance their spiritual and material concerns by focusing on religious duties and paying attention to worldly affairs. Even in the area of performing good deeds and religious duties, they are encouraged to pursue moderation. For example, Q. 2:267 encourages them to give charity and Q. 4:5 cautions them not to squander their money or give it to those who will waste it. For Muslims, the Sunnah is the living example of how the Prophet implemented the Qur'an. Most of them believe that his specific words, actions, and practices further endorse the fact that Islam frowns upon any extremism or fanaticism. On numerous occasions, Muhammad stressed that religion should be a matter of ease as opposed to one of hardship and extremism.²² He applied this philosophy in his lifestyle.

Whenever Muhammad was given the choice of two matters, he would choose the easier of the two as long as it was not sinful to do so, but if it was sinful he would not approach it. (He) never took revenge over anybody for his own sake, but (he did) only when Allah's legal limits were transgressed...²³

Muhammad encouraged his followers to do the same, to avoid going to the extreme and to beware of excessiveness in religion. Once when some Muslims tried desperately to follow him by performing *wisal*, a long continuous fast for more than one day as opposed to the traditional dawn-to-dusk fast, he strongly discouraged them by declaring that he received food and drink at night. He told them that they would only end up harming themselves.²⁴

Some Companions were extremely zealous in their attempts to please him and thus engaged in many acts of religious devotion. One time, when he learned that Abdullah ibn Amr ibn al-As was fasting every day and then praying all night long, he mentioned his disapproval and informed this Companion that one's spouse and one's body have their own rights over a person. Instead of going to the extreme and enduring great hardship, he encouraged them to fast three days a month; however, those who had greater strength could fast like Prophet David, namely, every other day.²⁵ A good deed or act of *'ibādah* (worship) can become something unhealthy if taken to the extreme. Muslims were instructed to do those deeds that were within their capacity, since anyone will eventually tire of doing good deeds if such behavior is continuously taken to the maximum.

***Wasaḥīyah* in the Context of Fanaticism**

If Islam is a religion of peace and moderation and the Prophet constantly advised his followers to take the middle path, why has the popular media so markedly identified it as a religion of fanatics? Moreover, if fanatics come in all shapes and colors, can be either religious or secular, and have varied motives and actions, then what explains the overwhelming linkage of anything related to Islam with fanaticism? Superficially, one perceives no clear rationale for the media to focus more on "Islamic fanatics" than any other type of fanatics. However, the answer becomes very clear when one examines this phenomenon in light of contemporary global, political, and economic conditions.

Common criminals, among them the Mafia, drug dealers, or armed maniacs firing at random targets, are only irritants to society. Neither they nor the nihilists are about to change the system. Despite fears of the growing numbers of cults, as well as skinheads in certain western countries, only a very small percentage of the population is actually involved with such groups. While public outcry is elicited by occasional tragedies – such as Reverend Jim Jones' ill-fated People's Temple cult that eventually led more than 900 individuals to commit mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana, during November 1978 – for the most part they only harm themselves.²⁶ This is considered a small price to pay for the majority's continued enjoyment of "freedom and democracy." Furthermore, as the majority of participants in such activities are fairly young, many can be co-opted back into the system after passing through this "phase."

While fanatical acts done in the name of national liberation are by far the most prevalent, for the most part these groups pose no real threat to the state. Even in cases where they do pose a possible threat, the problem remains con-

tained within certain geographical regions and as such, does not threaten the global political-economic power structure. For example, while Sikh nationalists may be considered a nuisance to New Delhi, they are no threat to the western powers. Similarly, while the Basque separatist movement ETA in Spain claims to be the authentic representative of the Basque people, the 1984 autonomous elections showed that, in reality, only 10 percent of the Basque adult population supported it. By 1989, their amount of support had dropped even further.²⁷ The IRA of Northern Ireland has also performed dismally at the polls. Clearly, none of these groups is strong enough to cause any real problems. Paul Wilkinson argues that technically there is no justification for either group's extreme activities, for ample democratic channels are open to them: free elections, freedom of worship and expression, and enough freedom to organize and belong to political parties.²⁸

Since the majority of fanatics are no threat to the established geo-political order, it is easy to understand why revolutionary fanatics are the most feared. With the demise of the Soviet empire, only one ideology now fits this bill: Islam. Islam, like Christianity, recognizes no political boundaries and transcends the particularistic claims of all ethnic groups and states. Moreover, it is a proselytizing religion.²⁹ As C. H. Dodd aptly points out, fanatical Muslim groups are

a profound threat to the existing order, political, social and religious... It is for this reason that all the states in the (Middle East) region, from the most extreme to the most moderate seek to eliminate them altogether or to ensure that they are firmly and securely under their strict control.³⁰

To add to the chagrin of global powers and interests, the goals of the contemporary Islamic resurgence are not confined to Muslim countries alone. Muslim "fanatics" are found even in the midst of their own polities. Yvonne Y. Haddad describes such "extremists" in America in the following manner:

They tend to be isolationist and centered in the small group of like-minded Muslims. Often they hold meetings led by itinerant (migrant) missionaries from overseas who lecture on the necessity of faithfulness to Islam... They affirm the necessity of supervision of public life by Islam and Islamic principles. Thus their goal is to strive to alter society so that Islam may rule.³¹

In addition to being a threat to the contemporary global political and economic power, Islamic groups have frequently targeted westerners in general and Americans in particular, because doing so is one sure way to draw international attention to their particular cause. The fact that "Islamic fundamen-

talist terror has killed more Americans than any other type of terrorism”³² certainly helps shed light on the reason for such strong anti-Islamic reporting in the global media, particularly during the last three decades. In fact, the media must take the lion’s share of the blame for maligning Islam and linking it with fanaticism.³³

While geo-political interests are largely responsible for such negative portrayals, Muslim fanatics are not totally blameless. With the recent “Arab Spring” and rapid regime changes in the Muslim world, we have seen the proliferation of Islamic groups and societies all over the globe. Unlike in some liberal democratic countries, where the IRA, the ETA, Christian Identity, and similar groups are free to express their views and their citizens are free to show their support through the electoral process, the majority of Muslim countries are characterized by non-freely elected governments and thus do not represent their inhabitants’ true interests. In many cases, they are client states of foreign powers that, in order to maintain their illegitimate rule and privileges, oppress their own people. Even when elections are held, they are done more for show and only when the ruling government can guarantee its continued power. When Muslims groups try to play by the rules, their aspirations are curtailed.

Recent history is replete with examples of how democracy is permissible in Muslim countries as long as the “Islamists” do not come to power. For example, when it appeared that Algeria’s FIS (the Islamic party) would assume power during the early 1990s, the military immediately intervened. In the Turkish elections of December 1995, Prime Minister Tansu Ciller’s secularist government was legitimately defeated. When the victorious Islamic Welfare Party asked other parties to help it form a government, they were prevented from doing so because they party leaders wanted to put Islamic principles into law.³⁴ In addition, the current religious-political situations throughout the Arab world, but particularly in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, have created unstable and unsafe environments in which fanatical and extremist religious groups can – and are – flourishing.

Some Muslims, frustrated by what they perceive to be a lack of freedom to participate legitimately in the electoral process, as well as to practice their religion and establish Islamic institutions, believe that only way to change things for the better is to make their point known “by any means necessary.” Sederberg argues that violent means can be justified only after all other avenues of redress have been exhausted, in other words as a last – but certainly not a first – resort.³⁵ Many Islamic groups believe that all other avenues of redress have been exhausted because, despite their members’ support, the democratic process is closed to them. Consequently, they increasingly resort to

such drastic measures as suicide attacks and car bombs,³⁶ guerrilla warfare, hostage taking, hijacking airplanes, attacking educational institutions, abusing of women and children, encouraging sectarian violence, and other offensive means to destabilize the government.

It is these latter means that have led the global media to indiscriminately classify Muslims as “fanatics” and identify Islam as the cause of their fanaticism. Certainly, if one accepts this type of thinking, then all Islamic groups with a political or social agenda fall into the slot known as “fanaticism.” According to their worldview, religion and politics are not suitable bedfellows and thus only non-threatening groups of a strictly spiritual nature can earn their stamp of approval. But even this approval is given with reservation, for frequently even the mere adherence to Islam causes one to be branded a “fanatic,” especially in this age of uncontrolled secularism.

In light of the apparent diversity among contemporary Islamic groups, how does one distinguish fanatical elements from those with moderate ideologies? Clearly, Muslim intellectuals must be of concern to non-Muslim scholars when determining such definitions, unless the former explicitly agree with a checklist of beliefs held by the latter. By the same token, Muslims cannot turn a blind eye and pretend that no fanatical Muslim groups exist. Notwithstanding the potential conflict of interest, an objective approach based on well-established academic research should be pursued as closely as possible so that those groups being assessed are approached on a case-by-case basis.

The first question to be asked here is whether the group’s philosophy and goals are in line with Islamic doctrine (*‘aqīdah*). If they are not, then the group must be rejected and labelled “deviationist.”³⁷ Second, are the means and methods used to achieve its goals consistent with Islamic teachings? If the group’s intentions are noble but its means are ignoble, then it must either reform its methodology or be rejected as un-Islamic. Finally, does the group possess sincerity (*taqwā*), or does it undertake activities merely for the sake of self-aggrandizement and publicity? Ultimately, if the group’s philosophy is acceptable from an Islamic point of view, then the means used to achieve its goals are within the Islamic framework. And if the group is sincere in its intention, then it cannot be labeled “fanatical.” However, if the group is deficient in any of the above criteria, then it becomes vulnerable to being labeled as “fanatical” or “extremist.”

A recent classification of contemporary Islamic movements in Southeast Asia (SEA) divided groups into “participatory” and “separatist” based on their religio-political affiliations. The former prefer to operate within the existing political framework, whereas the latter choose to work outside it and employ

fanatical means and techniques.³⁸ The majority of Islamic movements within the political-separatist category oppose the current political order and thus want to overthrow it and create their own “by any means necessary.” As a result, most of them are not afraid to employ violent methods to resolve their grievances and gain public attention. A number of them receive theological support from a few Muslim scholars who call for a revolution against any leadership that “has rebelled against God and His guidance and is responsible for the suffering of mankind.”³⁹

In the view of such scholars, present-day secular governments must be replaced by the Islamic political order. Rizal Sukma, director of the Indonesian Center for Strategic and International Studies, argues that many of these groups in Indonesia are motivated by all or some of the following ideas: (1) moral frustration, (2) ideological fear of globalization and western domination, (3) the desire for a *Pax Islamica* in Indonesia, (4) simple political opportunism, and (5) economic and social resentment.⁴⁰

An example of a recent regional Islamic movement with a separatist political agenda is the Indonesian-based Jamaah Islamiyah (JI). Kumar Ramakrishna asserts that this “radical terrorist Islamic organization has emerged as the biggest threat to SEA security,” for

[it is part of the global] “*Salafi Jihad*” ideology or “*al-Qaedaism*,” which was brought to SEA by Arab migrants from Yemen. Moreover, the organization seeks to establish *Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara*, or an Islamic State incorporating Indonesia, Malaysia, the southern Philippines, Brunei and Singapore.⁴¹

The JI perceives “attacks on Western targets as part of a fully justified and legitimate defensive *jihad*,”⁴² and its members have openly expressed their willingness to use force to achieve their goals. A statement issued by the organization immediately after the September 2004 bombing in Jakarta stated:

We [in the JI] have sent many messages to the Christian government in Australia regarding its participation in the war against our brothers in Iraq. Therefore, we have decided to punish it as we considered it the fiercest enemy of Allah and the Islamic religion. . . the hands that attacked them in Bali are the same hands that carried out the attack in Jakarta. . .⁴³

Other political separatist groups in the region include the Acehese Independent Movement in Indonesia, al-Arqam and al-Ma’unah in Malaysia and Brunei, the Liberation Front of Pattani and Barisan Revolusi Nasional in Thailand, and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) of the Philippines. In 1991, a fanatical group in the Philippines with a revolutionary

agenda that disagreed with the ongoing peace process formed the Abu Sayyaf (Bearer of the Sword) Group. It proclaimed that its main goal was to establish an Islamic state in the southern Philippines based on the Shar‘iah.⁴⁴ From 2000 until the present day it has engaged in a series of kidnappings of both Filipinos and foreign nationals in order to obtain ransom money or execute them.

While preparing this editorial (April 2015), a Malaysian news report confirmed that the police had launched a special operation against local cells linked to the Islamic State (IS).⁴⁵ The Special Branch’s Counter-Terrorism Division began this effort around Kuala Lumpur and the northwestern state of Kedah against cell members affiliated with IS who were planning to launch violent activities in the country. Malaysian Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar confirmed that the police arrested 17 suspected militants aged between 14 and 49 and affirmed that “[w]ith the latest arrest, the number of Malaysians nabbed by the Special Branch’s Counter-Terrorism Division for suspected involvement in militant activities in Syria was 92 suspects since the operation was launched in February 2013.”⁴⁶

Treatments for Fanaticism

The solution for any problem depends upon the nature of the problem. As we have seen, fanatics are a diverse lot. Accordingly, a diverse set of “treatments” should be administered.

- The fanaticism of criminals or activists who want to overthrow their governments can be discouraged via the judicial-legal system’s imposition of harsher penalties.
- Pathologically destructive fanatics can be helped by mental health professionals. For example, members of fanatical cult groups have been “cured” through controversial deprogramming techniques and counselling.⁴⁷
- Nationalist fanaticism can be reduced by granting greater political rights and freedoms to those concerned, including greater autonomy and decision-making power.

Nevertheless, the more serious question is can revolutionary fanatics be “cured”? The answer depends on how one perceives the “problem.” If the problem of “Islamic fanaticism” is perceived as a threat to contemporary geopolitical hegemonic interests, then a variety of techniques can and are being employed. Some of the means used to contain, restrict, and control the ac-

tivities and growth of Islamic groups, particularly those of the more “militant” or “fanatical” type, are economic sanctions, air embargoes, and arms control for states deemed friendly to such fanatics or those that harbor or sponsor them. For the most part, such countries are now considered guilty unless proven innocent by their actions – a clear violation of international law. Presently, the “media machine” is set in motion to rally people in the “free-thinking liberal democracies” against the “unfriendly” country or “renegade” state so that no one will question the legitimacy of the ensuing punitive actions.

If the perceived threat is posed by non-state actors, efforts can be made to prop up the nation’s military ability to crack down on these anti-state insurgents. Multilateral cooperation between western nations and “friendly” Muslim states has been encouraged in an all-out effort to deter such “Muslim fanatics” from toppling many of these regimes. The West’s current engagement in Afghanistan to defeat the Taliban is a good example of such cooperation.

Muslim states with weak popular support can further erode what little political rights and freedoms their citizens have by (1) restricting public assembly and movement, (2) controlling *madrasahs*, (3) censoring and thus restricting both the media and the weekly religious sermons to “safe subjects,” and (4) imprisoning the leaders of “fanatical” groups in an effort to “cure” or at least “contain” the problem.

But have these means proved effective in discouraging “Muslim fanatics,” or have they merely added fuel to the fire? Often this depends on a group’s organizational capacity and links to popular support within a particular society. There should be little doubt, however, that when Islamic groups and movements are denied political expression on a level playing field, and when their members’ freedoms of worship, movement, and livelihood are curtailed even further, the greater will be their propensity to engage in extremist and fanatical behavior. Some would argue that such individuals have nothing left to lose in terms of worldly affairs and only “paradise” to be attained for their efforts.

However, such logic does not legitimize all of their actions. As stated earlier, every Islamic group and movement must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. While jihad (struggle in the way of God) is permissible and obligatory for Muslims, it is still subject to limits (Q. 2:190-93). According to Syed Hussein Alatas, a prominent Malaysian thinker, jihad is “legitimate only when you (Muslims) are attacked or when you are driven out of your home, and you have to defend yourself.”⁴⁸ Its classical spirit is reflected in the following advice given by Caliph Abu Bakr al-Siddiq on the occasion of the Syrian expedition:

Remember that you are always in the presence of God....Avoid injustice and oppression...let not your victory be stained with the blood of women and children. Destroy not palm trees, nor burn any field of corn. Cut down no fruit trees, nor do any mischief to cattle or such as you kill to eat. When you make any covenant or article, stand to it and be as good as your word. As you go on, you will find some religious persons who live retired in monasteries and propose themselves to serve God that way, let them alone, neither kill them, nor destroy their monasteries.⁴⁹

As such, it is incumbent upon all sincere Islamic groups, organizations, and states to undertake self-evaluations in order to ensure that their philosophy complies with Islamic principles and that their methods do not violate the Shari'ah. In addition, all Muslim leaders must ensure that members do not overstep Islam's limits. Moreover, the "Islamicity" of some of the means used by various groups needs to be reviewed, discussed, and debated by contemporary qualified Islamic scholars. Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady, a prominent Malaysian scholar, recommends that

Muslims and their leaders should be exposed to the liberating influences of the various schools and the guidance from them to prevent the generation of fanaticism among Muslims and the various ways to combat fanaticism when they emerge among Muslims.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, the answers are not all clear-cut because the jurists have reached no unified opinion regarding fanatical activities and techniques.⁵¹ Nevertheless, if Islamic groups and movements do their best to follow what is permissible and avoid what is prohibited, then perhaps they will achieve their goals without succumbing to fanatical behavior.

One of the key Islamic concepts most challenged by contemporary fanatics is that of *wasatīyah*. This Arabic term, which is perhaps best translated as "justly balanced," is derived from "We made you a justly balanced community (*ummatan wasaṭan*) so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness [to it] before you" (Q. 2:143). This translation reflects the interpretation of both classical and modern Muslim intellectuals that *ummatan wasaṭan* means "a justly balanced community" and that its citizens therefore enjoy social justice, freedom, and equality. In fact, this concept is relevant to the political, economic, social, and religious facets of life. The historical record provided by Islamic tradition as to its concept and implications gives even more evidence of its importance.

An increasingly important imperative of *wasatīyah* is the need to oppose and control unhealthy elements, such as extreme ideologies and interpreta-

tions. One initiative in that regard is the 2013 establishment of the International Institute of Wasatiyah (IIW) that, under the auspices of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), has been entrusted with systematically studying and promoting this concept in society. In particular, IIW has been conducting research on the challenges facing modern societies in terms of ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity. It is responding to questions such as: How can the modern state effectively accommodate multiple and sometimes competing worldviews within society while at the same time maintaining societal cohesion and harmony? Is it possible to allow religious groups the freedom to reaffirm their identity and faith, as well as to practice their diverse rituals and traditions, without leading to the society's destruction? To what extent is religious moderation maintained and protected in a multi-religious state?

In responding to these questions, the IIW has recently published two books: *Wasafiyah (Moderation): A Multidisciplinary Study* (New York: LEGAS, 2014) and *Application of Wasafiyah in the Contemporary Muslim World* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2015). The two titles can be utilized as additional academic sources for both students and scholars of Islamic studies.

This Issue

This special issue on “Applying Moderation in Contemporary Muslim Societies” began with an invitation to social scientists to reflect upon and respond to this topic while providing a “stepping stone” for further research on applying it. Since this concept has its roots in history and civilizations, we start with M. Ashraf Adeel’s “Moderation in Greek and Islamic Traditions, and a Virtue Ethics of the Qur’an.” He claims that this Qur’anic concept needs to be explored carefully at a comprehensive philosophic level if it is to meet the need for balance in society. His analysis of both the classical Greek and Islamic traditions in this regard highlights the ethical views of Platonic-Aristotelian and classical Muslim thinkers (e.g., Ibn Miskawayh and al-Ghazali) on moderation.

In her “Moderation and al-Ghazali in Turkey: Responses to Skepticism, Modernity, and Pluralism,” Taraneh Wilkinson explores the country’s theology faculties and their contributions to the challenges of modernity. She posits that modernity is strongly associated with such questions as tolerance and freedom of thought, but that it is also linked to issues of skepticism, atheism, and pluralism. Her article examines how such a position reflects modernity’s positive values and responds to its challenges. She highlights those resources that deal

with religious moderation in al-Ghazali's writings and how they are utilized and analyzed in these particular faculties. Wilkinson focuses on two recent works by the contemporary Turkish theologians Mehmet Bayrakdar and Adnan Aslan and argues that not only are both thinkers suitable for the label of *moderate*, but that they also engage their own theological interests and interpretations with those of al-Ghazali.

While the application of *wasatīyah* can be associated with most fields of knowledge, Joseph Alagha's contribution is specifically on "Moderation and the Performing Arts in Contemporary Muslim Societies." For him, Islamic arts are referred to as "purposeful art" – "clean art" that portrays good deeds, as distinguished from bad deeds that characterize indecent or "lowbrow art." In his paper, moderation provides a novel reading of the maxims of Islamic jurisprudence (*qawā'id al-fiqh*), whereby performing art promotes benefits (*maṣāliḥ*) and avoids harm (*maḥāsīd*).

The final contribution is Zakiyuddin Baidhawiy's "The Muhammadiyah's Promotion of Moderation." He examines the role of Indonesia's largest Islamic civil organization in promoting moderation within the Muslim community. This sociological study, which focuses on the organizational efforts to establish social ideals within the framework of civil society, shows that the movement's social ideal has been deliberately based upon three Indonesian domains, namely, the political, economic, and cultural.

In addition to these four papers, Ahmad El-Muhammady's short forum paper deals with "Applying *Wasatīyah* within the Malaysian Religio-Political Context." He argues that given the present-day context, *wasatīyah* needs to respond to the extremism now manifesting itself in politics, economics, culture, and religion.

We hope that our readers will find these papers thought-provoking for their understanding of *wasatīyah* as well as stimulating for its application. We also feel confident that these papers will serve as sources of inspiration and motivation for their own research.

Endnotes

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