
Islam Is a Religion of Peace

Can the wave of violence sweeping the Islamic world be traced back to the religion's core teachings? An FP debate about the roots of extremism.

BY **MANAL OMAR**

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*In the past few weeks, both Russia and the United States have escalated their military campaigns against the Islamic State. As the brutal jihadist group continues to wreak havoc in Syria and Iraq, **Foreign Policy's** Peace Channel, a partnership with the United States Institute of Peace, asked United States Institute of Peace acting Vice President Manal Omar, one of the foremost voices on peace and Islam, and **Ayaan Hirsi Ali**, author of *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*, to debate what is behind this newest breed of extremism, and how can it be defeated. In the age of al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Boko Haram, is there a link between the violence these groups perpetrate and the faith they profess? (Read **Ayaan Hirsi Ali's** piece [here](#).)*

There is a tempting logic that has gained prominence in the post-9/11 world that attributes violent extremism from Muslims to the core tenets of Islam. It is tempting, of course, because if there is one single driver of conflict, after all, then there is one solution. Trying to understand the complex roots of violence can seem overwhelming, and trying to find solutions to it can leave policymakers and civic leaders paralyzed. Yet the concept of one cause — and, therefore, one solution — can be very dangerous. In the best case, this oversimplification may waste financial and human efforts to solve problems because they are based on a faulty diagnosis. In the worst case, it can actually fuel the conflict.

The temptation toward simplicity is evident even in the question posed in this debate. The framing reveals a fundamental error: that violent extremism is fundamental to Islam rather than committed by individuals. The fact that there is violence emanating from parts of the Muslim world does not mean that violence is a product of the religion.

The complicated truth of the matter is that the extremist violence that has overtaken a majority of Muslim countries, including Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan, is the product of complex political and social circumstances. They include colonial legacies and more modern great power politics — and the artificial borders that they bequeathed the region. The violence is perpetrated by official structures that favor a few over the many, and the collapse of government institutions. Religion, certainly, is part of the mix, especially in fragile nations or under authoritarian regimes, but that comes into play not because of the nature of the faith but because of the way it is abused and manipulated.

To grasp this complexity, it is important to understand three areas: the role of global politics that have destabilized the region and inflamed tensions; how dysfunctional states create an opening for extremism; and finally, how religion fills the gaps created by international and domestic uncertainties.

Let's start with the politics. In doing so, it's important to note that Western states have played a significant role in the rise of extremist groups. Middle East experts such as Hassan Hassan, who co-authored the book *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, argue that the emergence of the self-styled Islamic State (another name for ISIS) has more to do with U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East — who it supports, how its military interventions have changed the region — than with the Quran. The U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority's 2003 order to dissolve the Iraqi Armed Forces, for example, left hundreds of thousands of well-trained soldiers bitter and unemployed. Many of these **officers** now provide the militants with the military expertise required to conquer territory as quickly as they have.

Another example of the United States' role in stoking extremism is its support for the United Nations' policies on Israel, which critics have attacked as a double standard. In 2003, John Austin, a former British Parliamentarian, wrote an **article** for the Palestinian NGO **Miftah** citing conflicts from Kosovo to East Timor to Iraq to Rwanda. In each of those cases the U.N. imposed enforcement measures such as arms embargos, and international tribunals to prosecute crimes against humanity. Yet on Israel's illegal building of settlements, there has been no action despite numerous U.N. resolutions dating back to the late 1970s often because of U.S. intervention on its behalf.

As for state-level problems, domestic power struggles and government dysfunction across the Middle East have also opened the door for violent extremist groups. Robert I. Rotberg outlines in his [book](#), *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, that a state's failure to provide citizens with basic rights and services allows violent nonstate actors to emerge and take control. Failures were not limited to economic needs; a lack of political inclusion, freedom of expression, and the right to live with dignity have been primary drivers of youth radicalization and violence. A more recent example can be seen in Iraq and Syria: the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front have offered services and material benefits to lure citizens into joining the fight.

A 2015 [study](#) by Mercy Corps, *Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence*, which examined conflicts in countries such as Afghanistan, Colombia, and Somalia, found that the principal drivers of political violence are not the high unemployment or lack of opportunities traditionally articulated by development agencies. Rather, the [study found](#) that the political violence, which is often framed in religious terms, was linked to experiences of injustice: discrimination, corruption, and abuse by security forces.

In this context, religious spaces often become incredibly important — and powerful. Extremist groups don't just offer services such as employment, they also proffer a utopian ideology that extends beyond the rhetoric of suicide and sacrifice to promise an ideal state built on strict principles of "justice" and order based on their twisted interpretation of Islam. Islam, in turn, becomes a tool for violent groups to attract support for their causes, much like the way nation-states have used nationalism and patriotic fervor. And the only venue often available for recruitment in otherwise repressive societies is the more radical religious institutions.

Under authoritarian rulers such as Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi, many countries in the Middle East and beyond eliminated media outlets, student unions, and professional associations that were not directly under the control of the state. For Muslims in these environments, the mosque became the sole channel for expressing opposition, and the weekly Friday sermon the only place for dissidents to reach the people.

Using Islam as a tool of political extremism has led to many different results. The circumstances that produced the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq are different from what shaped Boko Haram in Nigeria, though both claim to be genuine Islamic groups. In the latter case, the extremist organization evolved as a response to the Nigerian government's heavy-handed approach and ultimate killing of the group's founder, Muhammad Yusuf in 2009. Prior to that, the group mainly had waged low-level attacks, rather than the spectacular assaults they now conduct against civilians and the Nigerian military.

Boko Haram and its ilk have manipulated Islam as a powerful recruitment tool, in much the same way Western states use nationalism to mobilize support for wars. Confrontations such as the invasion of Iraq, or the Soviet Union's incursion into Afghanistan, have sparked the creation of more extremist groups — by destroying civil society, for example — than religious belief ever could.

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Those who claim Islam is an inherently violent religion ignore the overwhelming majority of adherents to the faith — there are more than 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide — who live peacefully. They would also ignore that using religion as a justification for violence is nothing new. There are countless examples of members of other religions invoking faith as they perpetrate violence — Buddhist nationalist movements in Sri Lanka and Myanmar instigating violent campaigns against Muslims, for instance. Most people are able to critically analyze these movements and not lay the blame on Buddhism or Christianity.

The most prominent Muslim academics agree extremist groups believe in a fringe version of Islam well outside the scholarly consensus. In 2014, more than 120 of the world's top Muslim leaders and scholars wrote an [open letter](#) to the Islamic State's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and his followers, using the [same religious texts](#) the militants cite and arguing the group's practices are not legitimate in Islam. Signatories include the former and current Grand Muftis of Egypt and top Muslim clerics from Nigeria, the U.S., Canada, Pakistan, and Indonesia.

Muslims have taken grave risks to condemn violence, and some are on the front lines militarily too. Youth activists across the world regularly receive death threats as they offer alternative narratives to resolve conflict through nonviolence. Others have picked up arms to combat these extremist groups when condemnation is not enough. It is Muslims on the ground throughout Iraq and Syria who are leading the fight against the Islamic State. If the tenets of Islam could truly cause violence, all these Muslims would be joining the Islamic State instead of risking their lives to stop it.

Ironically, those who insist the Islamic State is a natural outgrowth of Islam share a similarly narrow conception of the religion as its followers. Despite the wealth of diversity and growth within Islam, they insist on defining it as monolithic.

Intisar Rabb, a professor of law and the director of the Islamic Legal Studies Program at Harvard Law School, argued in an email exchange, “Sunni Islam’s most curious blessing and its curse is perhaps its radical legal pluralism: the ability to contemplate that any interpretation of the law, so long as it relates to and engages a sophisticated process of interpretation, is a good-faith effort to arrive at the ‘right answer,’ which may change over time.” Historically, this has allowed for change and reformulation of the law to fit times and places as disparate as 7th century China to 10th century Baghdad to 20th century America, Rabb said. This characteristic, however, can become a curse, because it speaks of no final authority and often leaves a vacuum that permits crude or hostile interpretations that hold sway with the unsuspecting.

Shiite Muslims, for their part, adhere to a broad norm of following a living expert interpreter of Islamic law (called a mujtahid), who can evaluate and refine Islamic values for contemporary circumstances. In the context of Iraq, that has proved a valuable asset in containing some violence. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's statements and fatwas (religious rulings) even since the beginning of the conflict in 2003 directly prevented mass revenge killings on **a number of occasions**. One of his **fatwas** this year called for restraint after Shiite-dominated Iraqi government troops and militias freed Tikrit and revealed mass grave sites that presented visceral evidence of June's massacre of hundreds, possibly thousands, of Iraqi soldiers at the nearby Camp Speicher, when the Islamic State overran the military base. The revelation had heightened the potential of **revenge** attacks against Sunnis because the Islamic State claims to represent and defend all Sunnis.

Besides exacerbating conflict, oversimplifying the underlying causes by laying the blame at the door of an entire religion can mean billions of aid dollars wasted in chasing a false premise, and opportunities missed in the meantime. Seeking to use moderate Muslim clerics superficially to counter extremist messaging, for example, may have little impact if the root of the problem lies elsewhere.

Solving the problem of violent extremism demands embracing the complexity of the problem over the simplistic black-and-white narratives used by extremists on both sides of the debate. Scholarly analysis, and the lived experiences of more than 1 billion Muslims, including myself, makes clear that violence committed by Muslims is not because of the faith. Once this is understood, the world can stop focusing misguided attention on one ostensible factor that has been twisted unrecognizably. With a more balanced approach, it's possible to demonstrate that violent extremism has no state or religion, and that all identities, ethnicities, and religions are part of the solution.

Read Ayaan Hirsi Ali's piece [here](#).

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