
Islam Is a Religion of Violence

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.

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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 Ayaan Hirsi Ali, author of **Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now**, and United States Institute of Peace acting Vice President **Manal Omar**, one of the foremost voices on peace and Islam, 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 **Manal Omar's** piece [here](#).)*

In the 14 years since the attacks of 9/11 brought Islamic terrorism to the forefront of American and Western awareness and then-President George W. Bush launched the “Global War on Terror,” the violent strain of Islam appears to have metastasized. With tracts of Syria and Iraq in the hands of the self-styled Islamic State, Libya and Somalia engulfed in anarchy, Yemen being torn apart by civil war, the Taliban resurging in Afghanistan, and Boko Haram terrorizing Nigeria, policymakers are farther away from eliminating the threat of violent Islamism than they were when they began the effort. In fact, Western countries are increasingly witnessing domestic attacks such as the murder of British military drummer Lee Rigby and the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013, the shootings at Parliament Hill in Canada in 2014, the attacks at satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and at a Jewish supermarket in Paris this past January, and most recently the terrorist attack in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on a military recruiting center and naval compound.

But does this violent extremism stem from Islam's sacred texts? Or is it the product of circumstance, which has twisted and contorted Islam's foundations?

To answer this, it's worth first drawing the important distinction between Islam as a set of ideas and Muslims as adherents. The socioeconomic, political, and cultural circumstances of Muslims are varied across the globe, but I believe that we can distinguish three different groups of Muslims in the world today based on how they envision and practice their faith.

The first group is the most problematic — the fundamentalists who envision a regime based on sharia, Islamic religious law. They argue for an Islam largely or completely unchanged from its original seventh-century version and take it as a requirement of their faith that they impose it on everyone else. I call them "Medina Muslims," in that they see the *forcible* imposition of sharia as their religious duty, following the example of the Prophet Mohammed when he was based in Medina. They exploit their fellow Muslims' respect for sharia law as a divine code that takes precedence over civil laws. It is only after they have laid this foundation that they are able to persuade their recruits to engage in jihad.

The second group — and the clear majority throughout the Muslim world — consists of Muslims who are loyal to the core creed and worship devoutly but are not inclined to practice violence or even intolerance towards non-Muslims. I call this group "mecca Muslims." The fundamental problem is that the majority of otherwise peaceful and law-abiding Muslims are unwilling to acknowledge, much less to repudiate, the theological warrant for intolerance and violence embedded in their own religious texts.

More recently, and corresponding with the rise of Islamic terrorism, a third group is emerging within Islam — Muslim reformers or, as I call them, "modifying Muslims" — who promote the separation of religion from politics and other reforms. Although some are apostates, the majority of dissidents are believers, among them clerics who have come to realize that their religion must change if its followers are not to be condemned to an interminable cycle of political violence.

The future of Islam and the world's relationship with Muslims will be decided by which of the two minority groups — the Medina Muslims and the reformers — wins the support of the meccan majority. That is why focusing on “violent extremism” is to focus on a symptom of a much more profound ideological epidemic that has its root causes in Islamic doctrine.

To understand whether violence is inherent in the doctrine of Islam, it is important to look at the example of the founding father of Islam, Mohammed, and the passages in the Quran and Islamic jurisprudence used to justify the violence we currently see in so many parts of the Muslim world. In Mecca, Mohammed preached to his fellow tribesmen to abandon their gods and accept his. He preached about charity and the conditions of widows and orphans. (This method of proselytizing or persuasion, called *dawa* in Arabic, remains an important component of Islam to this day.) However, during his time in Mecca, Mohammed and his small band of believers had little success in converting others to this new religion. So, a decade after Mohammed first began preaching, he fled to Medina. Over time he cobbled together a militia and began to wage wars.

Anyone seeking support for armed jihad in the name of Allah will find ample support in the passages in the Quran and Hadith that relate to Mohammed's Medina period. For example, Q4:95 states, “Allah hath granted a grade higher to those who strive and fight with their goods and persons than to those who sit (at home).” Q8:60 advises Muslims “to strike terror into (the hearts of) the enemies, of Allah and your enemies, and others besides, whom ye may not know, but whom Allah doth know.” Finally, Q9:29 instructs Muslims: “Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the *Jizya* with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.”

Mainstream Islamic jurisprudence continues to maintain that the so-called “sword verses” (9:5 and 9:29) have “abrogated, canceled, and replaced” those verses in the Quran that call for “tolerance, compassion, and peace.”

As for the example of Mohammed, Sahih Muslim, one of the six major authoritative Hadith collections, claims the Prophet Mohammed undertook no fewer than 19 military expeditions, personally fighting in eight of them. In the aftermath of the 627 Battle of the Trench, “Mohammed felt free to deal harshly with the Banu Qurayza, executing their men and selling their women and children into slavery,” according to Yale Professor of Religious Studies Gerhard Bowering in his book *Islamic Political Thought*. As the Princeton scholar Michael Cook observed in his book *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics*, “the historical salience of warfare against unbelievers ... was thus written into the foundational texts” of Islam.

There lies the duality within Islam. It’s possible to claim, following Mohammed’s example in Mecca, that Islam is a religion of peace. But it’s also possible to claim, as the Islamic State does, that a revelation was sent to Mohammed commanding Muslims to wage jihad until every human being on the planet accepts Islam or a state of subservience, on the basis of his legacy in Medina. The key question is not whether Islam is a religion of peace, but rather, whether Muslims follow the Mohammed of Medina, regardless of whether they are Sunni or Shiite.

Today, the West is still struggling to understand the religious justification for the Medina ideology, which is growing, and the links between nonviolence and violence within it. Two main viewpoints have emerged in the debate on the causes of violent extremism in Islam. The difference between them is reflected in the different terminology used by proponents of the rival views.

Popular academics such as John Esposito at Georgetown and author Karen Armstrong believe that religion — Islam, in this case — is the “circumstantial” bit and that the real causes of Islamist violence are poverty, political marginalization, cultural isolation, and other forms of alienation, including real or perceived discrimination against Muslims. These apologists for Islam use words such as “radicalism,” “violent extremism,” and “terrorism” to describe the various attacks around the world committed in the name of Islam. If Islam is mentioned at all, it is to say that Islam is being perverted, or hijacked. They are quick to assert that Islam is no different from any other religion, that there are terrible aspects to other religions, and that Islam is in no way unique. That view is more or less the “official” view of policymakers, not only of the U.S. government, but also of most Western countries (though policy changes are beginning to appear on this front in some countries such as the U.K., Canada, and Australia).

But the apologists’ position has been a complete policy failure because it denies the religious justifications the Quran and the Hadith provide for violence, gender inequality, and discrimination against other religions.

Proponents of the alternative view, such as the late academic Patricia Crone and author Paul Berman, rely on different terms such as “political Islam,” Islamism, Salafism, Wahhabism, and Jihadism. All of these terms are designed to convey the religious basis of the phenomenon. The argument is that an ideological movement to impose sharia law, by force if necessary, is gaining ground across the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia, and even in Europe. In a [speech](#) this past July, British Prime Minister David Cameron said: “[S]imply denying any connection between the religion of Islam and the extremists doesn’t work, because these extremists are self-identifying as Muslims. The fact is from Woolwich to Tunisia, from Ottawa to Bali, these murderers all spout the same twisted narrative, one that claims to be based on a particular faith. Now it is an exercise in futility to deny that.” I agree.

The view that the ideology of radical Islam is rooted in Islamic scripture understands fully the cause of terrorism; it takes religious arguments seriously, and does not view them as a mere smokescreen for underlying “real” motivations, such as socio-economic grievances. This school of thought understands that the problem of radicalization begins long before a suicide bomber straps on his vest or a militant picks up his machine gun; it begins in mosques and schools where imams preach hate, intolerance, and adherence to Medina Islam.

Western governments have tried to engage with “moderate Muslims”: imams and community leaders who denounce terrorist attacks and claim to represent the true, peaceful Islam. But this has not amounted to meaningful ideological engagement. These so-called moderate representatives of Islam insist that violence has *nothing* to do with Islam and as a result the intolerant and violent aspects of the Quran and the Hadith are never acknowledged or rejected. There is never any discussion about change within Islam to bring the morally outdated parts of the religion in line with modernity or genuine tolerance for those who believe differently.

Despotic governments, civil war, anarchy, economic despair — all of these factors doubtless contribute to the spread of the Islamist movement. But it is only after the West and, more importantly, Muslims themselves recognize and defeat the religious ideology on which this movement rests that its spread will be arrested. And if we are to defeat the ideology we cannot focus only on violent extremism. We need to confront the *nonviolent preaching* of sharia and martyrdom that precedes all acts of jihad.

We will not win against the Medina ideology by stopping the suicide bomber just before he detonates himself, wherever he may be; another will soon take his (or her) place. We will not win by stamping out the Islamic State or al Qaeda or Boko Haram or al-Shabab; a new radical group will just pop up somewhere else. We will win only if we engage with the ideology of Islamist extremism, and counter the message of death, intolerance, and the pursuit of the afterlife with our own far preferable message of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Read Manal Omar’s piece [here](#).

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