

Confronting Violence in the Name of Islam

In April 2015 we discussed the history of Islam and the violence espoused by fundamentalist groups and terrorists, who use passages from the Quran to justify their violent actions. But many Muslim scholars argue that the fundamentalist/terrorist interpretation of the Quran is incorrect and in context, the relevant passages in the Quran mean something quite different.

WhyIslam.org: The Verses of War

“When read in context, the above verses [the verses of war] do not even remotely suggest an exhortation for Muslims to be vicious or hateful towards people of other faiths. Far from this, the Qur’an actually requires that Muslims conduct themselves with fairness and dignity in all matters, and especially in regard to interfaith relations, as indicated by the following verse:

“Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just.” [Al-Qur’an 60:8]”

Full text: <http://www.whyislam.org/jihad-2/jihad-faqs/verses-of-quran-on-jihad/>

So why do we face terrorism in the name of Islam? Is blaming it entirely on religion the easy way out and can we hope to forge a successful counter if we take a one-dimensional view of the causes of terrorism?

Karen Armstrong, who has studied and written about the history of religious fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, makes this observation:

...Muslims had a much harsher introduction to modernity. Before the birth of the modern state in the crucible of colonialism, Islam had continued in many Muslim lands to operate as the organizing principle of society. In 1920, after the First World War and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France divided Ottoman territories into Western-style nation-states and established mandates and protectorates there before granting these new countries independence...The frontiers drawn up by the Europeans were so arbitrary that it was extremely difficult to create a national “imaginary community”. In Iraq, for example, where Sunnis were a minority, the British appointed a Sunni ruler to govern both the Shii majority and the Kurds in the north. In Lebanon, 50 percent of the population was Muslim and naturally wanted close economic and political relations with their Arab neighbors, but the Christian government selected by the French preferred stronger ties with Europe.

The economic situation in most Middle Eastern countries where extremists have had success as recruiters is dire.

“Riyadh is struggling to reduce unemployment among its own nationals. Saudi officials are particularly focused on employing its large youth population, which generally lacks the education and technical skills the private sector needs.”

“Iraqi leaders remain hard pressed to translate macroeconomic gains into an improved standard of living for the Iraqi populace. Unemployment remains a problem throughout the country despite a bloated public sector.”

“Syria: Long-run economic constraints include foreign trade barriers, declining oil production, high unemployment, rising budget deficits, increasing pressure on water supplies caused by heavy use in agriculture, rapid population growth, industrial expansion, and water pollution, and the degree of war-damaged infrastructure.”

“Yemen continues to face difficult long-term challenges, including declining water resources, high unemployment, severe food scarcity, and a high population growth rate.”

“Jordan's economy is among the smallest in the Middle East, ...[o]ther economic challenges for the government include chronic high rates of poverty, unemployment, inflation, and a large budget deficit and resulting government debt.”

[All summaries from the CIA Fact Book]

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir, professor of international relations at the Center for Global Affairs at NYU, has observed:

“All considered, the vast majority of the Arab people accept their lot in silent desperation. But the relatively small minority who are engaged in violent extremism rose to defy by whatever means both Western powers and the authoritarian Arab regimes. These jihadists differ in age, financial ability, education and family prominence; they do not fit a single profile nor do they follow a single path to extremism.

However, they all have one thing in common: hatred of the West and their own corrupt leaders. They no longer believe that their governments will heed their call for change; they believe Western influence is a curse and only jihad can change their destiny and the course of history...

Though the use of force is at times necessary to destroy an irredeemable foe such as ISIS, it is critical to recognize that no amount of military force can eradicate ideology and religious conviction. A multitude of measures are necessary to counter violent extremism, including education, economic assistance, job opportunities, integration, addressing grievances, engagement in social activities, and much more.”

Full text: <https://consortiumnews.com/2015/04/10/reasons-for-the-mideasts-despair/>

To summarize, we face:

1. An untenable political situation that has yielded failed states or states held together only by force.
2. An economic situation where the vast majority (particularly the young) have no hope of betterment.
3. A religious basis for violence against perceived enemies.
4. A complex problem where any single solution is unlikely to succeed.

Addressing these issues may require a spectrum of responses:

- Direct military action on both a large and small scale
- Military assistance
- Action to counter social media propaganda and recruiting
- Cyber warfare against terrorists
- Economic assistance
- Economic sanctions against countries that support terrorism
- Humanitarian aid
- Increased vigilance at home through public awareness and education
- More secure borders
- Reassessing the relationship between civil liberties and the specter of terrorism
 - Legal ID
 - Profiling
 - Increased domestic surveillance
 - Habeas corpus
 - *Posse comitatus*
 - Judicial process—civilian or military courts for terrorists?