Knowledge Exchange Program

Violence, Terrorism, and Jihad:
An Islamic Perspective

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Praise be to Allah and prayers and peace be upon Allah's Prophet, Mohammed bin Abdullah, his family and companions. Calling for Allah, revealing the truth and refusing falsehood are included in the great mission assigned by Allah to Allah's greatest creating i.e. prophets and messengers, may Allah's peace be upon them and their followers. Almighty Allah once said, "And who is better in speech than him who prayeth unto his Lord and doeth right, and saith: Lo! I am of those who surrender (unto Him)" Surat Fussilat, Verse 33. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Da'wah and Guidance is honored by being appointed by the Government of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, may Allah protect him, to fulfill, inter alia, this great mission. In continuance of efforts of the Ministry's Knowledge Program to communicate the followers of all other religions and civilizations and explaining Islamic facts to them, this set of books concerning the subjects of jihad, shari'a, woman, ethics and life in Islam. Due to the importance of such subjects, being the core of several questions and ambiguity, these publications came to handle the misunderstanding of such concepts. I pray to Allah this program will be useful and be one of the means of communication with the followers of all other religions and civilizations to explain the fact of Islam to them without exaggeration or default in order to achieve the understanding based on facts and fair based co – existence.

Finally, I would like to thank the program executive commission presided by **Dr. Abdullah bin Fahd Al Lohaidan** and the Consulting Tribunal for their work of producing these guiding manuals and I pray to Almighty Allah that the reader shall find his desired knowledge since knowledge, if properly grounded, is the base of all good.

"Allah's Peace, Mercy and Blessings be upon you."

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Violence, Terrorism, & Jihad: An Islamic Perspective

Though violence occurs in all regions of the world, perpetrated by criminals from every background and religious orientation, it seems that the Western world continues to associate Islam, more than any other faith, with violent acts. Recent violent events involving Muslims seem to give weight to the notion that Islam is a religion which condones, perhaps even promotes, violence. Our purpose here is to examine the truth about violence and those who carry it out, and to demonstrate clearly that Islam is in fact a peaceful and law-abiding faith whose followers are no more likely to commit violent acts than people from any other religion, race, or region of our complex world. There is a desperate need, therefore, for clarification of Islam's perspective on violence in all its forms and manifestations. Before attempting to set the record straight regarding Islam's view of violence and aggression, it is essential that we bear the following in mind:

1. Islam, like any other religion, should be judged on the basis of its doctrines and teachings, not on the behavior of a few individuals who may claim to act on its behalf. In other words, we must be draw a line between what Islam teaches and what some individuals calling themselves Muslims, or claiming to represent Islam, do.

2. Scholars who possess the knowledge necessary to understand and accurately interpret Islamic teachings are best qualified to clarify Islam's position on such issues – not critics (disguised as "experts") whose opinions, interpretations and conclusions may be influenced by their own prejudices or a pervading climate in society.

3. In order to reach an understanding of such matters, we must draw our conclusions from an honest attempt to examine these issues objectively, based on an impartial review of the facts available to us.

That said, let us try to explore and discover together what Islam really says about violence, in all its forms.

Defining Violence

According to the World Health Organization, violence can be defined as follows: "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation."

Using this definition, Islam's stance toward violent acts must depend on the following factors:

- Those who carrying out the act
- Those upon whom said acts are inflicted
- The reason for the act
- The legality of the act

For example, if those carrying out the "intentional use of physical force or power" are legitimate governments or authoritative entities (as opposed to self-appointed "holy warriors"), and the recipients are convicted criminals being punished for their crimes in accordance with Islamic teachings, then Islam is not opposed to the use of force within these boundaries.

Like most nations of the world, Islamic societies have an established penal system based on legislation and judicial review, based on widely accepted cultural and social norms. An unfortunate necessity when dealing with criminal elements who seek to do harm within a society is the use of physical force or power to subdue, incarcerate, and punish such individuals. This is true around the world, even within the most developed

Western nations.

However, Islam does not permit ordinary civilians to take the law into their own hands – rather, it assigns this duty to the legitimate Muslim ruler, or those he commissions to carry out the task.

Likewise, Islam is not opposed to the use of force (as stated in the definition above) if it is carried out by legitimate nations against other states whose actions they feel threaten their existence, their sovereignty, their freedoms, their safety or their national security – though Islamic Law vehemently opposes any unjust use of force even in these circumstances.

Islam stipulates that in a military conflict, only soldiers on the battlefield should be confronted with force, and it is only against organized military troops that injurious physical force can be used. Islam prohibits that any harm be inflicted on women, children and other non-combatants, and forbids the use of force against any civilians. It is also important to note that although Islam accepts violence in battle, which is a natural consequence of war, it always prefers that a peaceful solution be reached rather than resorting to bloodshed.

The Qur'an (Islam's central holy text) clearly states: "And if they incline toward peace, preferring it to war, then incline to it (peace) also and put your trust in God." Al-Anfal, 8:61

In the early days of his prophethood, Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and his followers lived in Makkah for 13 years under extremely oppressive conditions. Many were tortured because of their abandonment of the idolatrous practices of the pagan Arabs, in favor of monotheism. In spite of this the Prophet (PBUH) and his followers refrained from armed struggle against their oppressors, and in most cases abandoned even self-defense, patiently bearing the cruelty they faced. When fighting became

inevitable and the Muslims were forced to fight for their very existence and religious freedom, even then they sought peaceful solutions rather than armed conflict.

All of which should clearly indicate that Islam is a religion that prefers peace to war, and non-violent solutions to conflict as opposed to violent ones. It is true that Islam is not completely opposed to the use of force in some special circumstances; rather Islam seeks to regulate the use of force, so it is employed only in appropriate degrees as dictated by divine law.

For example:
• authorities may be required to use force to apprehend a suspect and take him into custody
• a bystander may be obliged to use force to break up a fight
• a parent may be compelled to use "force" to responsibly discipline a child
• an innocent victim may need to use force to defend himself against a mugger

Islam condones the use of force in these and similar situations, provided that the use of force is proportionate and does not exceed legitimate bounds. Even in such cases Islam encourages its followers to avoid violence, and to employ a gentle approach whenever possible.

The Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have said "Gentleness and kindness do not accompany any matter except that they beautify it, and they are not removed from any matter except that they mar, spoil and disfigure it."

How then do we explain verses in the Qur'an that seem to encourage killing non-Muslims wherever they are found?

There are many verses in the Qur'an stating that one who coexists peacefully with Muslims is entitled to justice, compassion and respect, irrespective of their religion, as long as they are peaceful with Muslims. [60:8-9]

If it were true that the Qur'an instructs that any non-Muslim should be killed because of his/her religion, then what would explain the fact that religious minorities, through 1,400 years of Muslim history, not only survived but also thrived and found freedom to practice their faiths under Muslim rule?

Clearly, Muslims as a people were not and are not perfect, yet there were times when they had enough power to eliminate any non-Muslims under their rule. The restraint they showed were certainly influenced by Qur'anic injunctions against coercion in religion.

Consider also that the Qur'an allows a Muslim man to marry a Christian or Jewish woman. If it were true that the Qur'an demands killing non-Muslims, how could it permit a Muslim man to marry such women? Marriage is arguably the closest human relationship and is described in the Qur'an as a relationship characterized by peace, love and compassion [See: Qur'an 30:21], not violence because of theological differences.

Islam and the Roots of Violence

Islam has not only prohibited unjust and unwarranted violence, nor has it merely sought to temper and set limits on "necessary force", nor has it simply encouraged its followers to be gentle and kind even in the face of ignorance and brutality – Islam actually goes a step further, aiming to stop the issue at its core by addressing the root causes of violence.

Anger

In the Hadith (a report of the sayings or actions of the Prophet Muhammad or his companions) it was recorded that a man came to Muhammad and said: "Advise me." The Prophet simply said: "Do not allow yourself to become angry." The man asked for more advice, and the Prophet repeated "Do not allow yourself to become angry." The man kept asking, and the Prophet kept repeating the advice over and over again: "Do not allow yourself to become angry."

Islamic scholars agree that this event is significant in that Muslims are told not to translate their anger into action, that tragedies occur when people act upon anger.

Extremism

The Qur'an says, "O People of the Book, do not go to extremes in your religion." An-Nisa, 4:17

Islamic scholars consider this prohibition, directed at the People of the Book (Christians, Jews, and other non-Muslims whose faiths are revealed in scripture), as a prohibition for the Islamic nation as well, because extremism in religion is considered reprehensible whosoever commits it.

Islamic scholars have made note of other sayings by the Prophet (PBUH) regarding extremism, including: "Beware of extremism, for indeed the people before you were destroyed by nothing other than extremism in religious matters."

Prejudice

Throughout history, prejudice has been a spark igniting the fire of violence. The Qur'an has prohibited Muslims from harboring all prejudices on the basis of race, color, nationality or tribal affiliation:

"O Mankind, indeed We have created you from a male and a female and made you nations and tribes that you may come to know each other. Indeed the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous and God-fearing amongst you..." Al-Hujurat, 49:13

In other words, God values us based on piousness and faith, not any other criteria – and we should do the same.

The Prophet (PBUH) said: "O people! Indeed your Lord is one and your father is one. Certainly, an Arab is not superior to a non-Arab, nor is a non-Arab superior to an Arab, nor is a white man superior to a black man, nor a black man superior to a white man except by God-consciousness."

Greed

Greed is certainly a root cause of many acts of aggression and violence, which is why Islam repeatedly warns its followers against the unhealthy tendency of human beings to be greedy.

The Prophet (PBUH) said: "Beware of greed, for verily those who came before you were destroyed by their greed..."

Islam and Domestic Violence

Some critics have claimed that Islam condones acts of domestic violence, and supports the use of violence within the home to control a wife or children. Again, this biased

viewpoint is not supported by Islamic teachings, directives in the Qur'an, or the words of the Prophet Muhammad himself.

Domestic violence can be defined as "a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion, that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners where the perpetrator and victim are currently or have been previously dating, cohabiting, married etc."
It has also been defined it as: "behaviors used by one person in a relationship to control the other..."

Domestic violence can take many forms, including:

• Insults, name calling and put-downs
• Preventing a partner from contacting family and friends
• Withholding money
• Stopping a partner from getting or keeping a job
• Threatened or actual physical harm
• Sexual assault
• Stalking
• Intimidation

Islamic texts and teachings unequivocally condemn and forbid domestic violence. God orders male believers to deal with women in the way that is known and accepted by all to be good spousal conduct:

"And live with your wives according to Alm`aroof." An-Nisa, 4:19

Al-m'aroof has been defined by Islamic scholars as the use of kind words when addressing women, always treating women kindly, and having a presentable appearance in their presence whenever possible – or, to sum it up, "just as the husband would like the wife to behave towards him, so should he behave towards her."

There is no room for violence, abuse, threats, or any of the other examples listed above, within this directive to men and the treatment of their wives. Those who commit domestic violence are acting against Islamic teachings.

Islam and Terrorism

The issue that saddens modern Muslims more than any other is the unjust association of Islam with terrorism.

If two people were to commit similar violent crimes, one of them Muslim and the other from another faith, the sad truth is that the Muslim is almost sure to be labeled a terrorist, and his crime an "act of terror" with "religious and political motives." As for the other individual? Well, he may be deemed a "fanatic" with radical or extreme views, or perhaps a person with a mental condition, but his faith is seldom if ever considered the source, root cause or "driving force" behind his violent acts. This is the central struggle Muslims face today in their relationship with the non-Muslim world.

Terrorism Defined

Let us continue our process of analyzing these matters, beginning with a clear definition of terms to support our discussion.

Many of the definitions offered for terrorism are politically and emotionally charged. However, most experts seem to agree that terrorism can be defined as "the illegitimate and calculated use of violence or the threat of violence, intimidation or coercion, in order to attain goals that are political, philosophical, racial, ethnic, religious or ideological in nature."

Islam categorically opposes and absolutely prohibits its followers from using force to coerce anyone to accept its religious beliefs and practices, or comply with its political goals.

The Qur'an clearly states: "Let there be no compulsion in matters of religion..." Al-Baqarah, 2:256

Furthermore, Islam does not permit its followers to use bombings, kidnappings, hijackings, extortion or other "illegitimate" forms of violence as a means to achieve religious or political ends. As mentioned earlier, in Islam war can only be declared by genuine governments and must be carried out between nations – not individuals under the banner of a legitimate Muslim ruler, and not a self-appointed one – and only against combatants, never against civilians or other non-combatants.

It is true that Islam encourages Muslim nations to build strong armies, but not for the purpose of perpetrating acts of illegitimate and unjustified violence or threats against others; rather these armies should act as a deterrent to their enemies, who, recognizing the strength of the Muslim nation, will prefer peace with it to war.

"Jihad" in Islam

The Qur'anic Arabic term "jihad" has been commonly mistranslated as "Holy War". This is in fact a gross misrepresentation of its meaning, and the source of much misunderstanding and confusion. Let's set the record straight.

First, we must bear in mind that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, not in English, and if we look at the actual Arabic equivalent of the English expression "Holy War" we find the term "Harb Muqaddasah" – an expression that is not found anywhere in the Qur'an or in any of the words attributed to the Prophet.

Even when the Qur'an speaks about defensive war, **it never glorifies it or calls it "Holy"; rather, it is described as something which is inherently hated (2:216-217),** used only as a last resort, and only as a final alternative to doing nothing in the face of aggression or oppression.

Furthermore, the term "Holy War" means, lexically, a fight on behalf of one religion against another. There is no verse in the Qur'an that condones fighting any peaceful non-Muslim on the sole ground that he/she is a non-Muslim. In fact, it can be argued from a religious perspective that the expression "Holy War" is a contradiction in terms, as there is nothing "Holy" about war and its results: bloodshed, destruction and human suffering. Yes, in some extreme instances it might be the only choice, but should not be considered holy in and of itself.

To continue this analysis, it may be useful to discuss the meaning of "Jihad" in both its literal and religious meanings.

Jihad is an Arabic term derived from the root "J-H-D" which means, literally, to strive or exert effort. It is the same root from which the legal term "Ijtihad" is derived, which refers to the intellectual efforts exerted by scholars to come up with an informed religious opinion on a new issue or problem.

There are a few key verses in the Qur'an concerning the justification of resorting to combative Jihad, and they are all very specific in nature:

"And fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression, for, verily, Allah does not love the aggressors..."

"And fight against them until there is no more oppression and religion belongs to God [i.e. until people can worship Allah without fear of persecution], but if they desist, then all hostility shall cease, except against those who commit injustice."

It should be obvious from these key verses that the only two justifications of the combative-type of Jihad is to stop aggression and severe oppression. The condition for ceasing hostilities is not acceptance of Islam, but the halt of aggression and oppression from the opposing side.

Like the above verses, there are verses in the Qur'an which sanction fighting. These verses, however, when understood in their textual and historical context, deal with circumstances of war and should not be generalized.

Descriptions of aggressors or oppressors as rejecters of faith or idolatrous people does not mean that they are to be fought against because they are non-Muslims (regardless of the fact that, historically these aggressors happened were often non-Muslims). In fact the Qur'an allows fighting against fellow Muslims IF they are aggressors, and only if other means of restoring peace and justice have failed [49:8-9].

So, just to be clear – the fact is that fighting (violence) is only permitted in the presence of aggression, not because of differences of religion. No single verse in the Qur'an, when placed in its proper textual and historical context, permits fighting others on the basis of their faith, ethnicity or nationality. To do so contradicts several established Islamic values and principles.

Combative Jihad is not only restricted in terms of what may or may not justify it; how such combat is conducted it is also strictly regulated. Prophet Muhammad directed his followers and future Muslims on how to behave in the battlefield. And again, as a "hated act," war should not be resorted to if other peaceful and just means to stop aggression or oppression are available.

Further Islamic rules governing combat include:

• Intentions must be pure and no selfish, personal or nationalistic agenda should be the driving force.
• There must be a declaration of war by a legitimate authority after due consultation.
• Non-combatants should never be hurt.
• All must refrain from looting and unnecessary destruction.
• Prisoners of war and the injured must be treated humanely.

It should be noted that in the long history of Muslim people, there were times when such conditions and rules were adhered to and other times where there were violations to differing degrees. This is true of most peoples, as sad as that may be. There have also been some misinterpretations of the concept of Jihad by some scholars, possibly influenced at least in part by the circumstances of the time in which they lived.

The fact remains, however, that Islamic teachings should not be judged either by what some Muslims did in the past, or are doing today, or by any of these misinterpretations, past or present. The texts speak for themselves, and the Qur'an is clear on these matters.

Was Islam spread by force, at "the point of a sword"?

Anti-Islamic people often use certain verses from the Holy Qur'an to justify the stereotype that Islam is a religion of violence and intolerance, which was spread by the sword; closer analysis, however, reveals a more complex and specific reading. For example:

1. Sura 8.12 "Remember thy lord has inspired the angels with the message. Give firmness to the believers and instill terror into the hearts of the unbelievers. Smite them above their necks and smite the fingertips of them."

Standing alone and accepted at face value, this Sura (chapter of the Qur'an) appears to direct Muslims to commit violence against non-Muslims. But the truth is, this sura is

discussing a specific historical battle – the Battle of Badr; it is not a general directive for interacting with non-Muslims, and the "unbelievers" referenced here are hostile enemies on the battlefield.

2. Sura 9.5 "When the sacred months have passed, kill the idolaters wherever you find them."

This particular sura is one that anti-Islamists frequently use, taking verses of the Qur'an out of context, to misrepresent Islam; but let's look at the facts about this verse:

The "idolaters" mentioned refers to hostile enemies in the region, who had threatened the very existence of the early Muslims. These enemies were constantly plotting against Mohammed and his followers, and often their goal was to assassinate the Prophet and kill or enslave his followers.

Furthermore, critics invariably quote verse 5, but leave out the surrounding details mentioned in verses 4 and 6:

Verse 4 directs Muslims to honor their treaties and peaceful agreements with non-Muslims, and maintain good relations with allies even during hostile times.

Verse 6 says, "If one among the Pagans ask thee for asylum, grant it to him so that he may hear the Word of God and then escort him to where he can be secure."

Despite living under constant threat of attack, the Muslims still struggled to maintain peace and good relations with their non-Muslim neighbors, and to treat even their worst enemies humanely.

3. Sura 47.4 "When you encounter the unbelievers, Strike off their heads. Until you have made a wide slaughter among them tie up the remaining

captives."

Again, this Sura 47 was revealed during the first year of Hijrah (the migration), when the Muslims were under the constant threat of extinction by invasion from their enemies – the "unbelievers" referred to here – in Makkah.

These verses are harsh, and may seem to condone violence. But when taken in context, they are clearly in response to extreme circumstances, when the Islamic community was surrounded by hostile enemies, and only refer to the brutal realities of war. They are not in any way a general directive in how to interact with non-Muslims, and if they are used by anyone as an excuse for violence or terrorism, then they are being misused and exploited

The Holy Quran and the Traditions of Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him) show that Islam at it's core and at its source is a religion of peace. Terrorists who persecute innocent people because of their faith are not welcome, and they use Islam as a scapegoat. But Islam is not, and has never been, what they portray it to be.

Aren't there verses in the Qur'an that say Islam is the religion of truth, and therefore it must "prevail" over all other religions?

True Islam, practiced according to its original sources, the Qur'an and sunnah, is not imperialistic at all. Some Muslim rulers throughout history may have deviated from its teachings to one degree or another, but this is reflection of those individuals, not of Islam as a whole.

History bears testimony that Islam spread much faster during the periods of peace, not war. Even in periods when Muslims did not "prevail", economically, socially, militarily or politically, Islam continued to spread. The same phenomenon can be seen

today, which is arguably a time of great suffering and persecution of Muslims in many parts of the world.

Historically, even some who attacked Islam and committed horrible massacres of Muslims, such as the Mongols and the Crusaders, ultimately accepted Islam themselves. It is rather telling when we see the conqueror accepting the faith of the conquered, rather than the reverse.

A look at the map of the Muslim world today shows that the bulk of Muslims live in countries where there was no fighting, not even defensive fighting. An example is Indonesia, which today is home to nearly 200 million Muslims

In his book Preaching of Islam, Thomas Arnold, a former Christian missionary in India, indicated that while there have been certain periods where Muslim rulers have diverted from this tolerance, it was the fault of those rulers and cannot be attributed to Islamic teachings. He concludes that the two primary reasons for the spread of Islam all over the world were the merchants and the Sufis [mystics], two groups of people who went out, worked with humanity and gently invited others to the path of Allah.

It is worth asking how, if it were true that Islam allows the use of force to convert people, did religious minorities thrive in regions under Muslim rule? And why did the Qur'an and sunnah explicitly dictate regulations and rights for the protection of non-Muslim minorities living under the rule of Islam, if other religions are to be eliminated so that Islam may "prevail"?

Indeed, why does the Qur'an repeatedly speak about peaceful dialogue with non-Muslims [e.g. 29:46] if their faith is to be prevailed over in the first place?

It is true that three verses in the Qur'an [9:33, 48:28 and 61:9] state that

God sent forth His messenger [Muhammad] with the message of guidance and the religion of truth, so that it may "prevail" over all religions. But what does prevail mean in this context?

The word "prevail" should not be viewed only through the narrow lens of military or political power. There have been many tyrannical empires throughout history that prevailed, economically, politically or militarily, at one time or another – yet their dominance was impermanent. In fact, a better translation of the original Qur'anic Arabic term li-yuzhirahu is not "to prevail," but rather " to proclaim it". These verses are less about dominance or aggression, and more about sharing the beauty and benefits of the path to Allah.

Conclusion:

Muslims follow a religion of peace, mercy and forgiveness. If an individual Muslim were to commit an act of terrorism, this person would be guilty of violating the basic tenants of Islam.

When Timothy McVeigh bombed the Oklahoma City building, no American or Christian was labeled as a terrorist or was the target of hate crimes.
When Irish Christians carry out acts of terrorism against each other and on the British Isles, the Christian religion is not blamed but individuals or their political agenda. Unfortunately, the same is not true for American Muslims and Arabs. The vast majority of Muslims or Arabs have no association with the violent events around the world, yet Islam is invoked with terrorism. It is unfair to the 1.5 billion Muslims of the world, and the religion of Islam as a whole.

May God bless us all, and purify our hearts of all misunderstanding, malice, hatred and anger.

Organizational Structure

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