

**Jihad = Holy War = Terrorism:
The politics of conflation and denial¹**

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In the wake of 9/11, the Islamic notion of jihad has been described as both “holy war” and “terrorism.” In this paper, I unpack this two-fold conflation within the context of a broader discussion of the problem of interpretive extremism on the part of some Muslims and a long-standing and willful politics of misrecognition of Islam by the West.² This politics confuses Islam with Muslims, disregards the role of political, economic, cultural, and historical factors in shaping not only Muslim attitudes and actions, but also their readings of Islam, and denies Western complicity in creating the conditions that are conducive to extremism. In critiquing both Muslims and nonMuslims, the idea is to alert them to what may equally be at stake for them in egalitarian readings of Islam.

Of jihads and holy wars

Although many Muslims and nonMuslims render jihad as holy war, the word, as it occurs in Islam’s scripture, the Qur’an, means “striving” or “struggle,” and not war, much less a holy war, whose defining purpose is to propagate and/or enforce religious beliefs.³ In fact, there is no scriptural sanction in Islam for a holy war, unlike in Judaism and Christianity (the Old Testament); hence, using the holy war template to explain jihad obscures the specificity of Islamic, and specifically Qur’anic, formulations of jihad.

Depicting holy wars as quintessentially Islamic, also ignores the fact that, historically, the holy war tradition is a Western one inasmuch as such wars were decisive in shaping church-state relationships in medieval Europe until about the twelfth century. However, from then on, the concept of a holy war increasingly came to be contrasted to a just war and eventually was displaced by it following the Protestant Reformation and the carnage wrought by internecine European holy wars. By the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries, Europeans had come to regard as unjust wars that were fought for the purposes of propagating or enforcing religious beliefs, though not for defending them.⁴

This explicit equation of religion with injustice as well as attempts to separate religion and politics resulted also from the “Enlightenment’s prejudice against religion,” the tendency to think of religion as a “theological set of issues rather than . . . a profoundly political influence,” and the belief that modernity and religion were incompatible.⁵ One can, of course, question the validity of these assumptions—which were never universally shared—on both theoretical and historical grounds.

For instance, Muslims generally have not found it meaningful to pit faith against reason (one of the binaries underlying Enlightenment thinking); nor do they view religion as having nothing to do with the politics of living in this world. Historically, they also did not have to contrast a holy war to a just war because a war fought in accordance with the Qur’an’s teachings “would necessarily have to be a just war in its cause, its aim and the manner in which it is waged.”⁶ Since the Qur’an—which does not use the word “jihad” for war—forbids coercion in religion, the purpose of such a war is not to enforce Islam. Therefore, rendering jihad as “holy war” is doubly misleading since it reduces jihad to war and also implies that the war is unjust because it is religious. However, since Muslims are not always observant of the Qur’an’s teachings, it is necessary to begin by examining the Qur’an’s position on jihad before discussing how this position has been reframed in the classical Muslim doctrine of jihad as well as in modern formulations.

The Qur’an and Jihad

In the Qur’an, the word “jihad” (and its derivatives) occurs thirty-six times and refers in all cases to a moral-ethical struggle. Thus, the Qur’an speaks of the jihad of the

soul, the tongue, the pen, of faith, of morality, and so on (in Muslim tradition, the jihad of the tongue, the heart, and the hand), which together are said to constitute the “greater jihad.” The lesser jihad is considered to be the jihad of arms, but the Qur’an itself uses the word “*qital* [fighting] and its derivations [not jihad] for the practice of warfare;” it is Muslim tradition that “very early associated the two concepts.”⁷ Thus, “Jihad, as signifying the waging of war, is a post-Koranic usage”⁸ and must be understood in light of how Muslims interpreted the Qur’an at a particular political and historical conjuncture.

In the Qur’an, the “permission to engage in armed combat has explicit motives and is immediately limited. . . . Aggression and the initiation of combat without any valid reasons are forbidden.”⁹ As the Qur’an defines it, the purpose of fighting is to defend oneself, “to protect the community and to free isolated believers from persecution.”¹⁰ Several verses bear this out. For example, “Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged . . . those who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, ‘Our Sustainer is God.’” Indeed, the Qur’an recognizes the right not only of Muslims, but also of Christians and Jews, to resist religious persecution since the same verse also states that if God had “not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, all monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques—in all of which God’s name is abundantly extolled—would surely have been destroyed [before] now (22: 39-40).”¹¹

In addition to self-defense, the Qur’an also urges Muslims to fight on behalf of those “utterly helpless men and women and children who are crying ‘O our Sustainer! Lead us forth [to freedom] out of this land whose people are oppressors, and raise for us, out of Thy grace, a protector, and raise for us, out of Thy grace, one who will bring us

succor!” (4: 75).¹² Although this verse poses interpretive challenges in how to define oppression and liberation, it is not an invitation to aggression. Those who read aggression into the Qur’an often point to such lines as: “fight in God’s cause . . . [and] slay them wherever you may come upon them,” and “fight against them until . . . all worship is devoted to God alone,” and so on. However, quoting lines and verses randomly cannot generate a contextually accurate interpretation of the Qur’an which requires reading the verses (and the text itself) in their entirety. Thus, when we contextualize the lines quoted above, we can arrive at a radically different understanding of their meaning:

And fight in God’s cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression—for, verily, God does not love aggressors. And slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away—for oppression is even worse than killing. And fight not against them near the Inviolable House of Worship unless they fight against you there first: but if they fight against you, slay them: such shall be the recompense of those who deny the truth. But if they desist—behold, God is much forgiving, a dispenser of grace. Hence, fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to God alone: but if they desist, then all hostility shall cease, save against those who [willfully] do wrong (2: 190-193).¹³

I cannot do a lengthy or nuanced exegesis of these verses here and will restrict myself to pointing out what may be obvious even on a cursory reading. The first sentence sets the framework for interpreting the injunctions that follow and this sentence categorically forbids aggression. Subsequent sentences—which have to be understood in light of this command—establish that Muslims are to fight those who wage war against them and to end hostilities if aggression against them ceases.¹⁴ And, while some may read the “[until] all worship is devoted to God alone” to mean that Muslims must end religious differences by killing their enemies or assimilating them through conversion, such a reading is not warranted for at least two reasons. First, the Qur’an not only forbids compulsion in

religion (as it reminds the Prophet, his mission is to call people to Islam, not to oblige compliance on their part), but it also teaches that religious diversity exists because of Divine Will (I will return to this point below). Second, on both textual¹⁵ and historical grounds,¹⁶ one can read this line as referring to the *Muslims'* right to worship freely.

Significantly, even in a state of war, the Qur'an cautions against injustice. Thus, the verse that medieval Muslims read as summing up the ethos of Islamic rules about war instructs Muslims to "Stand up firmly for God, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice" (5: 8).¹⁷

One cannot, of course, arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the Qur'an's position on warfare by reading a few verses, but in quoting these verses I wanted to make the point that one can only read aggression into them only by reading them selectively and ignoring the relationship between the text and the historical contexts of its revelation. Such piecemeal, decontextualized, and ahistorical readings—which, unfortunately, are the norm on many issues—arise in a hermeneutics that can neither yield a holistic, nor a contextually accurate, understanding of the Qur'an's teachings.¹⁸

Classical Muslim doctrine of Jihad

Although it is from Qur'anic verses and also from accounts of the Prophet's life (as narrated by the hadith) that medieval jurists formulated the classical doctrine of jihad-as-war, this doctrine can best be understood in the context of the Muslim "philosophy of international relations."¹⁹ This philosophy was articulated during the "golden age" of Muslim history (the European Middle Ages) and at a time when the Muslims already had "established their great empire," as Karen Armstrong points out (i.e., at the height of their power). It thus is not surprising that jurists "would give a religious interpretation of this

conquest.”²⁰ They did this by dividing the world into the abode of Islam, *dar al-Islam*, and the abode of war, *dar al-harb*, with a third “world of reconciliation” situated between them.²¹ These divisions, however, described an existing reality and are not advocated by the Qur’an or by the Prophet’s traditions.²² Moreover, these divisions are juridical and not theological in nature inasmuch as the distinction between the two abodes “is not the religion of the population but the existence of specific institutions and the application of particular rules” within them.²³

The *dar al-Islam* exemplifies the abode of peace, justice, “law, order, and harmony” in which the laws are Islamic and “the Muslims and protected minorities enjoy security and the liberty to practice their religion, whether individually or collectively.” If a Muslim state does not meet these criteria, it cannot be part of the *dar al-Islam*.²⁴ The abode of war, on the other hand, is defined as the “reign of violence, ignorance, and tyranny, and is thus identified with the ‘world of injustice.’” However, it does not include all non-Muslim states; those that formally recognize Islam and do not threaten the Muslim community, “implying the guaranteed freedom of any person to embrace the faith and to observe its ritual obligations,” cannot be put in the *dar al-harb*²⁵ (they would presumably have to be part of the “world of reconciliation.”) Thus, to classical jurists it did not follow that the existence of the abode of war—i.e., of religious and legal diversity—in itself was reason enough for jihad against it and “in practice the Muslims accepted that they had reached the limits of their expansion by this date, and coexisted amicably with the non-Muslim world.”²⁶

Classical jurists also distinguished between offensive and defensive jihad on the basis of the “nature of the religious obligation that justifies it.”²⁷ Offensive jihad, though

a communal responsibility, could only be authorized by the designated leader of the Muslim community, the imam. However, this type of jihad “has been the subject of judicial and religious controversy, for neither the Qur’an nor the prophetic tradition appear to prescribe it in any precise manner.”²⁸ Defensive jihad, on the other hand, was considered an individual’s responsibility and prerogative. However, neither type of jihad was meant to enforce Islam. When the “Arabs burst out of Arabia they were not impelled by the ferocious power of ‘Islam,” contends Armstrong, even though Westerners “assume that Islam is a violent, militaristic faith which imposed itself on its subject peoples at sword-point.” As she says, this is an “inaccurate representation of the Muslim wars of expansion. There was nothing religious about these campaigns, and Umar [the caliph under whom they were waged] did not believe that he had a divine mandate to conquer the world.”²⁹ Rather, Muslim wars of conquest were “wars of state, not wars of religion.”³⁰ This is not to say that Muslims never used force for such purposes during their almost thousand years of regional/global hegemony. The Kharijites (like modern day extremists), were among those who did, but they disappeared very early, and at a time “when the Muslim state was rapidly expanding and becoming a great military force [proving] that Islam opposed fanaticism in its own cradle.”³¹ The opposition of the medieval Muslim community to fanaticism is evident also from its sensitivity “to the dangers of direct coercion, or state involvement in matters of belief.” The “moral regime [of this community] was at once firm on principles and distinctly inclined to forgive human weaknesses and diversity. The key note was moderation or balance, the middle way,” as exemplified in the works of al-Ghazzali.³²

In sum, even though the classical doctrine of jihad departs from the Qur'an's teachings in significant ways, it also does not espouse the idea of a holy war. Further, it lays down strict rules for jihad; these include a declaration of war, since the element of surprise is forbidden by Prophetic traditions, as are treachery, killing children, women, and noncombatants, taking hostages, endangering civilians, using fire or flooding to destroy the enemy, cutting down orchards, destroying places of worship, intentional mutilation, and poisoning water supplies, like wells.³³ On the basis of these criteria alone, one should be able to distinguish jihad from all other types of warfare.

Contemporary reformulations of jihad

In reality, of course, such distinctions often are difficult to make today in light of new definitions of jihad. The political and social contexts in which jurists initially defined warfare no longer pertain. The Muslim empire—the world's first modern empire that endured for nearly a millennium—has vanished (though it lives in communal memories since its last vestiges were dismantled just over fifty years ago), and in its place are a variety of regimes, often kept in place by the US/West, that are regarded as corrupt, oppressive, and unIslamic by their own people. Partly as a result of Western colonialism, most Muslim societies have experienced modernization not as economic development or political freedoms, but as a “coercive secularism.”³⁴

Reformulations of jihad are an integral aspect of the critiques of these conditions—notably by Qutb, Maududi, and Khomeini—in particular, of the US/West and of US/Western-oriented Muslim regimes. I cannot here examine these reformulations, or why many Muslims have embraced them.³⁵ Rather, I want to focus only on the theological recasting of the *dar al-Islam* and the *dar-al-harb* as “God's party versus Satan's” in most

new theories of jihad. On such views, there is only “one law, Sharia. All other law is mere human caprice. There is only one true system, Islam. All other systems are *jahiliyya* [the term given to preIslamic society].”³⁶ Consequently, believers now are encouraged to fight against religious and legal diversity thus bringing modern Muslim views of jihad in their fear and suspicion of difference closer to medieval Jewish and Christian thought³⁷ and in conflict with the Qur’an’s teachings. As the Qur’an tells us,

To each among you
Have We prescribed a Law
And an Open Way.
If God had so willed
[God] would have made you
A single People, but ([God’s]
Plan is) to test you in what
[God] hath given you: so strive
As in a race in all virtues (5: 51).³⁸

That is, religious and legal diversity exists by Divine plan and not as an aberration; it thus is not for humans to extinguish it through assimilation or extermination. The Qur’an reiterates this theme in another verse which states that God made humans “into Nations and tribes, that Ye may know each other (Not that ye may despise Each other). Verily The most honoured of you In the sight of God Is . . . the most Virtuous of you” (49:13).³⁹ The “knowing one another” that the Qur’an speaks of, argue scholars, “is clearly a mutual process, a dialogue,”⁴⁰ but this is precluded by the new conceptions of jihad in which dialogue and pluralism have become anathema and in which there is no possibility of a “reconciliation,” as in the classical Muslim doctrine of jihad.

Methodologically, such antipluralist and exclusivist readings of the Qur’an are a function of the theory of abrogation (*naskh*)⁴¹ that claims that “verses calling for pluralism, commanding Muslims to build bridges of understanding with nonMuslims, had

been abrogated by other verses that call for fighting the infidel.”⁴² And infidels now are seen to be Jews and Christians, whom the Qur’an designates as the People of the Book.

To ascribe these intolerant strains in some contemporary Muslim thought to “Islam” ignores that religions do not interpret themselves, people do. We therefore need to ask who is interpreting, how, and in what particular contexts. I believe it is the failure to do so that leads Muslims and their critics alike to misinterpret Islam and thus also its teachings on jihad (and on other issues as well, notably, sexual equality).⁴³ In part, of course, misrepresentations of Islam by its critics have to do their own epistemologies, psyches, and modes of Othering, as I will argue below.

Jihad, wars, and terrorism

A jihad that accords with the Qur’an’s teachings and the classical doctrine is more easily distinguishable from terrorism than are the newer forms of jihad that do not follow similar rules of engagement. However, the difficulty of making neat distinctions between the latter and terrorism have to do not only with the tactics of the new jihad, but also with the ways in which we define terrorism itself.

US statutes define terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”⁴⁴ This definition, however, can just as easily be applied to wars since wars also constitute premeditated, politically motivated violence, target noncombatants (often as a concerted policy), and are meant to influence audiences. Further, not only subnational groups, but also, states, can sponsor terrorism. But once we define states as terrorists, we erode even further the distinctions between terrorists and their victims, holding entire populations hostage for the activities of a few people. In

fact, people are victimized twice: once by the terrorists and once by those who hunt them down since both end up indiscriminately killing noncombatants. Additionally, defining states (or groups) as terrorists does not resolve the crucial question of why we label the same action “terrorism” in one case and a “freedom struggle” in another. If one person’s freedom fighter is another’s terrorist, on what basis can we distinguish between them?

For instance, the Jewish struggle that resulted in the founding of the Israeli state almost universally is represented as a nationalist struggle even though the Jewish claim to Palestine is theological, not political, in nature inasmuch as it arises in a covenant with God. However, the Palestinian struggle for a state of their own almost universally is depicted as a “holy war” rather than a nationalist and anticolonial struggle even though it arises in a political claim to land and is not based in arguments about religious rights or freedom. Further, few people would consider terrorism an innately “Jewish” phenomenon even though it was the Jewish Irgun, Stern gang, and Hagana that, sixty years ago, began the practice of bombing “gathering places [and] crowded Arab areas [in order to] terrorize the Arab community.”⁴⁵ The Stern gang even attacked Jewish banks, leading to “Jewish loss of life.”⁴⁶ The Irgun, on the other hand, massacred 250 civilians, including women and children, in the village of Deir Yassin.⁴⁷ For the British, then the occupying power in Palestine, these groups were terrorists, but for most Jews, they were patriots whose exploits enabled the founding of Israel (the leader of the Stern Gang, Menachim Begin, was even elected prime minister). Yet, the same Israelis (and most Americans) denounce the Palestinians as “terrorists” when they engage in similar forms of struggle against Israeli occupation, with the solitary exception that they also often kill themselves in the process. This has led many people to label terrorism itself an “Islamic”

phenomena and to re-present the suicide bomber as its gruesome poster-child. Quite forgotten are the Jewish gangs, the Japanese kamikaze pilots of World War II (the first suicide bombers of the last century), and all those whom we have been taught to venerate throughout history because of their willingness to kill and die in the name of God, king, or country. Why, then, the morbid obsession with Muslim suicide bombers and their objectification? (To Slavok Zizek,⁴⁸ it suggests a twisted narcissism. As he says, their willingness to die throws into relief “the rather sad fact that we, in the First World countries, find it more and more difficult even to imagine a public or universal Cause for which one would be ready to sacrifice one’s life.”)

I am not suggesting that Muslims cannot be terrorists, but rather, that depicting terrorism (and rage) as inherently “Islamic” not only singles out Islam and Muslims for exceptional treatment, but it also deflects attention from the non-religious sources of rage and violence, such as, in the Palestinian case, their (secular) struggle for a homeland. Portraying Palestinian suicide bombers as fanatics imbued by their religion with an uncontrollable death-wish nicely deflects attention away from the fact that the suicide bombings are a desperate measure of last resort by nationalists against Israeli violence and dehumanization. Not only do such representations fail to distinguish between the violence of the oppressor and that of the oppressed, but it also elides the violence of colonialism which is “violence in its natural state,” as Fanon⁴⁹ argued. Of the French in Algeria, he observed that the “colonial regime owes its legitimacy to force and at no time tries to hide this aspect of things.”⁵⁰ But whereas the colonizer’s violence is exonerated by being framed in the language of law, order, and morality, the violence of the colonized is taken as proof of their lawlessness, immorality, and barbarity; thus, when the Algerians

rose up against the French, they were typecast as barbaric and hysterical. Ironically, says Fanon, “He of whom *they* have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force. In fact, as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free.”⁵¹ For the colonized, whether Algerian or Palestinian, violence is the condition of their existence and they always are aware of the “complicit agreement [and] . . . homogeneity” between “the violence of the colonies and that peaceful violence that the world is steeped in.”⁵²

The analogy between French-occupied Algeria and Israeli-occupied Palestine is hardly over-drawn. As journalist Robert Fisk⁵³ argues, the

reality is that the Palestinian/Israeli conflict is the last colonial war. The French thought that they were fighting the last battle of this kind. They had long ago conquered Algeria. They set up their farms and settlements in the most beautiful land in North Africa. And when the Algerians demanded independence, they called them "terrorists" and they shot down their demonstrators and they tortured their guerrilla enemies and they murdered—in "targeted killings"—their antagonists.

History thus is repeating itself in Israel-Palestine, but most of us chosen to ignore this.

Arguably, then, what distinguishes terrorism from freedom struggles is not the form or content of the violence itself, but who gets to define it. To the extent that the power of naming is contingent on other (material) forms of power, hegemons always will be able to make opportunistic distinctions between terrorism and freedom struggles.⁵⁴ In fact, this definitional power also allows political dissent to be recast as terrorism or as conducive to terrorism. Thus, Muslim⁵⁵ criticisms of certain US policies (support for Israel, the bombings and sanctions against Iraq, and the bolstering of regimes despised by their own people) is misrepresented as religious extremism, or, alternatively, as proof of “Islamic rage,” a move that not only denies Muslims a political voice (inasmuch as it

particularizes Muslim responses to the world as having to do with “Islam” rather than the politics of the “real” world), but also ignores that oppression breeds its own modes of resistance to it.

Finally, not just “terrorism,” but even wars that we think of as just, such as the US’s “war against terrorism,”⁵⁶ involve practices that the medieval Muslim doctrine of jihad regarded as unjust, such as endangering civilians and killing non-combatants. As such, unless there is greater clarity and agreement on what justice in war entails and on what constitutes terrorism, it is dishonest to label all modes of armed resistance on the part of Muslims as terroristic and unjust.

The politics of misrecognition

That “average” Americans cannot distinguish conceptually between jihad, holy war, and terrorism largely because they know little or nothing about Islam is clear enough; what is less clear are the reasons for their ignorance given the 1,400-year long encounter between Islam and what we now call “the West.” To me, one reason has to do with what I call a willful politics of misrecognition of Islam in the West. Historically, this politics has taken the form either of positing a radical difference between Islam and Judaism/Christianity, or, denying Islam’s specificity by re-presenting it as a derivative of Judaism/Christianity (though the similarities suggested by a shared genealogy are negated by depicting it as a bad facsimile.) The first tendency is at work in the confusion of jihad with terrorism and the second in its mistranslation as “holy war,” though the two are not mutually exclusive inasmuch as “differences and similarities [generally] inhabit each other.”⁵⁷

The tendency to treat Islam as wholly different from, but also similar (albeit in a debased form) to, Judaism and Christianity dates from medieval times. As R.W. Southern⁵⁸ explains it, the initial European misrecognition of Islam (he does not use this phrase) resulted from the spatial distance from it—the “ignorance of a confined space”—and engendered a reliance on Biblical exegesis to explain its origins, and, in the face of difficulties in doing so, its ends. Although this mode of ignorance gave Islam “a niche in Christian history,” says Southern, it also put an indelibly apocryphal stamp on its representations. In fact, even Europeans who lived “in the middle of Islam” (Muslim Spain)⁵⁹ were able to locate in it “the signs of a sinister conspiracy against Christianity. They thought they saw in all its details—and they knew very few—that total negation of Christianity which would mark the contrivances of Antichrist,”⁶⁰ hence of end times.

Following the success of the First Crusade, however, continues Southern, it was the “ignorance of a triumphant imagination” that gave rise to a picture of Islam whose “details were only accidentally true.”⁶¹ Thus, “legends and fantasies were taken to represent a more or less truthful account of what they purported to describe. But, as soon as they were produced they took on a literary life of their own . . . [and] changed very little from generation to generation,” persisting for centuries.⁶² Not until Bacon did the Europeans attempt to engage Islam philosophically and even then in order to refute and challenge it. Southern thus summarizes European views of Islam until the end of the thirteenth century as “first Biblical and unhopeful, the second imaginative and untruthful, the third philosophical and, at least for a short period, extravagantly optimistic.”⁶³

I took this short detour into history in order to make two points. First, Islam always has posed a problem of “a deeper comprehension”⁶⁴ to Westerners for reasons

having to do with their own psyches, epistemologies, and modes of alterity. Second, the fears and fantasies of medieval Europeans continue to linger beneath the surface in most modern discourses on Islam.⁶⁵ How else can one explain the public resonance of Mr. Bush's use of the word "crusade" to describe the "war against terrorism?" (Even those who criticized him did so because the word had historical and symbolic resonance for them.) Why else would so many people frame the hijackers actions in apocalyptic terms rather than political? How else could the media push the tautology that a visceral Muslim rage explains Muslim anger towards Christians and Jews (rather than saying that many US and Israeli policies have bred Muslim political opposition to them)? Why else would most people pick, out of the world's one billion Muslims, a handful of men—bin Laden, the Taliban, the hijackers—as exemplifying the real Islam? How else could "Islamists" like Bernard Lewis explain the history of Muslim societies in terms not of economics or politics, but of essentializing psychological essences of "hate and spite, rage and self-pity . . . grievance and victimhood"⁶⁶ without being accused publicly of racism?

Of course, how one thinks of Others always has implications for oneself. The ease with which people have embraced such representations of Islam and Muslims has foreclosed debate on the political viability and moral rectitude of the US's "war against terrorism" that so far has targeted more noncombatants, including women and children, than it has avowed terrorists. Domestically, the willingness to view Arabs and Muslims as potential terrorists has made all US citizens vulnerable to surveillance. I would ascribe this not only to a hyper-patriotism but also to a misrecognition of Islam and Muslims.

Challenging interpretive extremism

It would be naïve to accuse only the West of misreading Islam. Muslims equally are guilty of doing so. How else can one explain the extremists' view of people like bin Laden, the hijackers, and the Taliban as exemplifying the "real" Islam? How else could moderate Muslims have done nothing to contest, for instance, the Taliban's distortions of Islam? These are, of course, extreme examples but I am concerned with interpretive extremism and more specifically, with how Muslims can contest it.

Elsewhere, I have examined at length the interpretive practices by means of which Muslims read violence into the Qur'an, specially against women. Part of my argument is that what we understand the Qur'an to be saying depends on who reads it, how, and in what contexts. That is, meaning is contingent on method and, unfortunately, what passes for an "Islamic" method for reading the Qur'an is demonstrably at odds with the criteria that the Qur'an stipulates for its own reading, to say nothing of our understanding of God as, for instance, Just. Further, I argue that method has been shaped by the nature of the relationship between interpretive communities and Muslim states, and thus by how both religious and secular-political authority has been structured in Muslim societies. Hence, in order to understand why Muslims have tended to favor certain readings of the Qur'an over others at different times and places, we need to examine the relationship between hermeneutics and history, the nature of Muslim states, and the configuration of both religious and secular power within these states (Barlas, 2002).

Of course, to say that knowledge cannot be independent of the contexts and processes of its own production is not to say anything new, at least in most circles. But, once we concede the role of human agency and social structures in interpretive processes, it becomes incumbent to try and understand why Muslim identities, consciousnesses, and

histories have intertwined in specific ways to produce certain readings of the Qur'an rather than others. This way of approaching the problem allows us to distinguish between the Qur'an and its exegesis on the one hand, and between religious texts, cultures, and histories on the other, both of which are needed to challenge extremist readings of Islam.

We also must learn to read the Qur'an for its "best meanings," as the Qur'an itself asks us to do. Such an injunction clearly recognizes that we can read a text in multiple ways but that not all readings of it may be equally appropriate and acceptable. Indeed, as I noted, the Qur'an specifies the criteria for judging between the contextual legitimacy of different readings. Personally, I understand the Qur'an's counsel to read for the best meanings and its definition of Islam as "*sirat ul mustaqeem*," the straight path, the middle path, the path of moderation, and its warning not to commit excesses in religion, as pointing to a rejection of extremist readings, including patriarchal ones.⁶⁷

I made this short detour into the arena of Qur'anic interpretation in order to make two points. First, extremist readings of the Qur'an are a function both of certain modes of interpretive reasoning, and of the way in which religious and state-political power are configured in Muslim states. In turn, we need to understand the role of external factors—notably Western hegemony and policies—in shaping the politics of Muslim states. And, second, Muslims are not obligated to accept oppressive readings of the Qur'an since the Qur'an itself has freed us from such a burden.

I also contend that the problem of interpretive extremism is the product not only of extremist thinking, but also of the unwillingness of moderate Muslims to challenge it in the fatuous belief that "Islamism is Islamism," as an Algerian feminist puts it in a well-acclaimed documentary shown in the West. This fatalism—which also is embedded in a

politics of denial and misrecognition—allows the very “Islamists” that moderate Muslims decry, a free hand to interpret the religion in ways that then victimizes them.

Sadly, the tendency today is for most Muslims to wash their hands off the extremists, perhaps because of the guilt by association many of us feel even though the guilt should have to do not with *their* being Muslims but with *our* having disengaged from Islam, which has given extremists a free rein. It thus is not enough for Muslims to rush to distance ourselves from the extremists in the wake of 9/11. Rather, we also need to take responsibility for reading the Qur’an in liberatory modes ourselves so as to provide an alternative and egalitarian framework for interpreting Islam.

In sum, I believe that extremist interpretations of the Qur’an constitute misreadings of it and that the best way to challenge interpretive extremism is to rethink our methodologies for interpreting Islam. For too long, we have taken as canonical methods and readings that do an injustice to the Qur’an’s own egalitarianism and that continue to provide extremists, misogynists, and vigilantes the ideological fuel necessary for their violence. What we need urgently are interpretations that ensure the protection of rights and freedoms that we associate with secularism—such as sexual equality and the freedom of conscience, religion, speech, mutual consultation, and so on—but which also are assured to us by our own scripture. Paying lip service to the Qur’an’s egalitarianism while continuing to repress and oppress people in its name is not just rant hypocrisy, but it also is a recipe for perpetuating the kinds of violence that, in the long-term, assuredly will spell our mutual destruction.

Endnotes

¹ This paper—which still is very much a work in progress—grew out of presentations I was invited to make at a conference on Pakistan at the American University in D.C. (April 2002) and at an international seminar on terrorism in Pakistan (December 2001).

² While it is inappropriate to pit Islam against the West in this way given that the West is a geographic space and Islam a religion that exists within it, I retain this term here because it is so integrally a part of the self-definition of most people in “the West.”

³ This is why rendering jihad as crusade is wrong inasmuch as crusades were holy wars.

⁴ James Turner Johnson. *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1977).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ Marcel A. Boisard. *Jihad: A Commitment to Universal Peace* (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1988) p. 27.

⁷ Johnson, *Holy War*, 61.

⁸ Ali, quoted in Johnson, *ibid.*, 36.

⁹ Boisard, *Jihad*, 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹ Muhammad Asad. *The Message of the Quran*. (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980) p. 512.

¹² *Ibid.*, 118.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴ This has not always been the case in modern times. The US bombed Nagasaki and Hiroshima after the Japanese had broadcast their terms of surrender and US forces shot 100,000 retreating Iraqi troops in the back during the Gulf war, with generals calling it a “duck shoot.”

¹⁵ See Asad, *Quran*, 1980: 41, fnnt 170.

¹⁶ At the time of the revelation of this verse, Muslims were in fact being persecuted for their religious practices. *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Quoted in Boisard, *Jihad*, 83

¹⁸ See Asma Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Boisard, *Jihad*, 23.

²⁰ Karen Armstrong. *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000) p. 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²² Johnson, *Holy War*, 66.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

²⁶ Armstrong, *Islam*, 30.

²⁷ Johnson, *Holy War*, 63.

²⁸ Boisard, *Jihad*, 27

²⁹ Armstrong, *Islam*, 29.

³⁰ Johnson, *Holy War*, 96.

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- ³¹ Ibid, 15.
- ³² Francis Robinson, ed. *Cambridge Illustrated History: Islamic World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 173.
- ³³ See Boisard, *Jihad*, and Jamilah Kolocotronis. *Islamic Jihad: An Historical Perspective* (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1990).
- ³⁴ Armstrong, *Islam*, 166.
- ³⁵ See, for instance, John Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*, London: Pluto Press, 3rd edition, 2002, and John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- ³⁶ David Zeidan. "The Islamic Fundamentalist View of Life as a Perennial Battle," *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) Journal*, edited by Barry Rubin. Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 2001) p. 5.
- ³⁷ See Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney for a discussion of European-Christian views. Chapter 2: "Intimate Indians: Difference as Degeneration in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe." *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*, unpolished manuscript, 2002.
- ³⁸ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary*. (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1988) pp. 258-259.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 1407.
- ⁴⁰ Merryl Wyn Davies. *Knowing One Another: Shaping an Islamic Anthropology*. (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd., 1988) p. 6.
- ⁴¹ In the Qur'anic sense, argues Fazlur Rahman, abrogation means that some ayat were replaced by others at God's command; i.e., it is a historical development. *Naskh* "does not mean the juristic doctrine of abrogation" which developed later and "which is an attempt to smooth out apparent differences in the import of certain verses." *Major Themes of the Quran*, (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), p. 90.
- ⁴² Ali S. Asani, "On Peace, Violence and the Qur'an: An American Muslim Reflects on Pluralism and Exclusivism within the Islamic Tradition." Circulated on the Internet; p. 4.
- ⁴³ Barlas, "*Believing Women*."
- ⁴⁴ Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f (d). See State Department's site at: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2000/index.cfm?docid=2453&clid=2408>.
- ⁴⁵ Charles Smith. *Palestine and Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1992) pp. 19; 140.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 120.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 143.
- ⁴⁸ Slavok Zizek "Welcome to the Desert of the Real." September 17, 2001; off the internet.
- ⁴⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 196), p. 61.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 84.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 84, emphasis in original.
- ⁵² Ibid., 81.
- ⁵³ Robert Fisk: "This terrible conflict is the last colonial war," Independent, December 4, 2001. <http://argument.independent.co.uk/commentators/story.jsp?story=108161>.

⁵⁴ Segments of the media have noted that the Afghan jihad against the Soviets was called a freedom struggle but the same “jihad,” when directed at the US, became terrorism. Other such examples abound.

⁵⁵ In fact, not only Muslims, but also conscientious people all over the world, including in the US, disapprove of these policies on both ethical and political grounds. Insisting that only Muslim terrorists and fanatics oppose them not only reframes legitimate political dissent as religious extremism, but it also ends up imbuing the very people we denounce as being evil with a principled social conscience!

⁵⁶ See Howard Zinn. “A Just Cause, Not a Just War.” *The Progressive*, December, 2001.

⁵⁷ I owe this phrasing and insight to Jonathan Gil Harris of the English department at Ithaca College.

⁵⁸ R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 17.

⁵⁹ I am not sure what to make of this part of Southern’s argument. If space eventually had nothing to do with Europeans’ ideas of Islam and both distance from and proximity to it produced the same results, then why posit the “ignorance of a confined space?”

⁶⁰ Southern, *Western Views*, 25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14; 28.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁵ This, of course, raises interesting questions about whether modernity constitutes an epistemic break with premodernity in every area of life and thought.

⁶⁶ From Paul Kennedy’s review of Bernard Lewis: *What Went Wrong?* *New York Times Book Review* (January 27, 2002), p. 9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*