

Jihad, Holy War, and Terrorism: The Politics of Conflation and Denial¹

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Abstract

In the wake of 9/11, the Islamic concept of jihad has been described as both “holy war” and “terrorism.” In this paper, I unpack this twofold conflation within the context of a broader discussion of the problem of some Muslims’ interpretive extremism and the West’s long-standing and willful politics of misrecognition of Islam.² This politics confuses Islam with Muslims; disregards the role of political, economic, cultural, and historical factors in shaping Muslims’ attitudes, actions, and readings of Islam; and denies western complicity in creating conducive conditions for extremism. In critiquing both Muslims and non-Muslims, the idea is to alert them to what may equally be at stake for them in the egalitarian readings of Islam.

Of Jihads and Holy Wars

Many Muslims and non-Muslims render jihad as holy war. However, when used in the Qur’an, jihad means a “striving” or “struggle,” and not war – much less a holy war – defined by propagating and/or enforcing religious beliefs.³ In fact, Islam has no scriptural sanction for holy war, unlike Judaism and Christianity (the Old Testament). Hence, using the holy war template to explain jihad obscures the specificity of Islamic, and in particular Qur’anic, formulations of jihad.

Depicting holy wars as quintessentially Islamic also ignores the historical fact that holy war is a western tradition, inasmuch as such wars were decisive in shaping Church–state relationships in medieval Europe until about the twelfth century. But from then on, this concept increasingly came

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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 any war fought to propagate or enforce religious beliefs, not to defend them.⁴

This explicit equating of religion with injustice, as well as attempts to separate religion and politics, was another result of 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 Of course one can question the validity of these assumptions – which were never universally shared – on both theoretical and historical grounds.

For instance, Muslims in general have not found it meaningful to pit faith against reason (one of the binaries underlying Enlightenment thinking) or to view religion as irrelevant to the politics of worldly life. 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 does not use “jihad” for war and forbids coercion in religion, such a war is not intended to enforce Islam. Therefore, rendering jihad as “holy war” is doubly misleading, since it reduces jihad to war and implies that the war is unjust because it is religious. However, since Muslims do not always observe the Qur’an’s teachings, its position on jihad must be analyzed before discussing how it has been reframed in the classical and modern doctrinal formulations.

The Qur’an and Jihad

In the Qur’an, “jihad” (and its derivatives) occurs 36 times and refers in all cases to a moral-ethical struggle, such as the jihad of the soul, the tongue, or the pen, of faith or morality, and so on. (In the Islamic tradition, when the jihad of the tongue, the heart, and the hand are taken together, they are said to constitute the “greater jihad.”) The “lesser jihad” is considered to be the jihad of arms, for which the Qur’an uses “qital [fighting] and its derivations [not jihad] for the practice of warfare.” Islamic tradition “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." The Qur'an defines the purpose of fighting as 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 of Muslims, 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

Muslims also are urged 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, for the Qur'an's verses (and the text itself) must be read 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 (2:190-93).¹³

As I cannot give a lengthy or nuanced exegesis of these verses here, I 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 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 the aggression ceases.¹⁴ While some may read the “[until] all worship is devoted to God alone” to mean that Muslims must end religious differences by killing or assimilating their enemies through conversion, such a reading is not warranted for at least two reasons. First, the Qur’an forbids compulsion in religion (2:256 reminds the Prophet that his mission is to call people to Islam, not to force their compliance) and 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, the Qur’an cautions against injustice even during a state of war. Thus, the verse that medieval Muslims read as summing up the ethos of Islamic rules of 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

Of course, one cannot acquire a comprehensive understanding of the Qur’an’s position on warfare by reading a few verses. My purpose in quoting them was to point out that one can read aggression into them only by reading them selectively and ignoring the relationship between the text and its revelation’s historical contexts. Such piecemeal, decontextualized, and ahistorical readings, which unfortunately are the norm on many issues, arise in a hermeneutics that cannot yield a holistic or a contextually or textually accurate understanding of the Qur’an’s teachings.¹⁸

The Classical Islamic Doctrine of Jihad

Although medieval jurists formulated the classical doctrine of jihad-as-war from Qur’anic verses and Hadith literature, this doctrine can best be understood in the context of the Islamic “philosophy of international relations.”¹⁹ Karen Armstrong points out that this philosophy was articulated during the “golden age” of Muslim history (Europe’s Middle Ages) and at a time when the Muslims already had “established their great empire.” Thus it is not surprising that jurists “would give a religious interpretation of this conquest,”²⁰ 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 were not advocated by the Qur’an or the Hadith.²² Moreover, they were 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

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 dar al-Islam.²⁴ Dar al-harb, 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, for those that formally recognize Islam and do not threaten the Muslim community, thereby “implying the guaranteed freedom of any person to embrace the faith and to observe its ritual obligations,” cannot be put therein (presumably they would have to be part of the “world of reconciliation”).²⁵ Thus, classical jurists did not consider the existence of dar al-harb (i.e., religious and legal diversity) to be a suitable reason, in itself, to launch a 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 be authorized only by the imam (the Muslim community’s designated leader). 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. But neither type 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 does not mean that Muslims never used force for such purposes during their almost millennium-long 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 medieval Muslim community’s opposition to fanaticism also is evident 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 does not espouse the idea of a holy war. Furthermore, it lays down strict rules for jihad, such as declaring 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 (e.g., 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 (although it lives in communal memories, since its last vestiges were dismantled just over 80 years ago), and in its place are a variety of regimes regarded by their own people as corrupt, oppressive, and un-Islamic, and which often are kept in place by the US/West. 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 critiquing these conditions – notably by Qutb, Maududi, and Khomeini – in particular, of the US/West and of US/western-oriented Muslim regimes. I cannot examine these reformulations here or why many Muslims have embraced them.³⁵

Rather, I want to focus on the theological recasting of dar al-Islam and dar al-harb as “God’s party versus Satan’s” in most new theories of jihad. On such views, there is only “one law, Shari‘ah. All other law is mere human caprice. There is only one true system, Islam. All other systems are jahiliyah [the term given to pre-Islamic society].”³⁶ Consequently, believers now are encouraged to fight against religious and legal diversity, which brings 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

In other words, as religious and legal diversity exists by Divine plan and not as an aberration, people cannot extinguish it through assimilation or extermination. The Qur’an reiterates this theme elsewhere, stating that God made humans “into nations and tribes, that Ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is ... the most virtuous of you” (49:13).³⁹ Scholars argue that the phrase knowing one another “is clearly a mutual process, a dialogue.”⁴⁰ But this is precluded by the new conceptions of jihad, in which dialogue and pluralism are anathema and in which there is no possibility of a “reconciliation,” as in the classical Islamic doctrine of jihad.

Methodologically, such antipluralist and exclusivist readings of the Qur’an are based upon the theory of abrogation (*naskh*),⁴¹ which claims that “verses calling for pluralism, commanding Muslims to build bridges of understanding with non-Muslims, 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.”

Such intolerance in certain trends of contemporary Islamic thought ignores the fact that religions do not interpret themselves, people do. Given this, we need to ask who is interpreting, how it is being done, and what are the particular contexts. The failure to do so, in my opinion, 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 with their own epistemologies, psyches, and modes of “Othering,” as I will argue below.

Jihad, War, and Terrorism

A jihad that accords with Qur'anic teachings and 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 is a result of the new jihad's tactics and the way in which we define terrorism.

American statutes define terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience."⁴⁴ This definition, however, can be applied just as easily to wars, since wars also constitute premeditated, politically motivated violence, target noncombatants (often as a concerted policy), and are meant to influence audiences. Furthermore, both sub-national groups and states can sponsor terrorism. But once we define states as terrorists, we erode even further the distinctions between terrorists and their victims, and thereby end up 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 the terrorists down, since both end up killing noncombatants indiscriminately. In addition, defining states (or groups) as terrorists does not resolve the crucial question of why we label the same action "terrorism" in one case and "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 Israel's existence is represented almost universally 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 Palestinians' struggle for their own state is depicted almost universally as a "holy war" rather than as a nationalist and anticolonial struggle, even though it arises in a political claim to land and is not based upon 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 began the practice of bombing "gathering places [and] crowded Arab areas [in order to] terrorize the Arab community" 60 years ago.⁴⁵ The Stern Gang attacked Jewish banks, leading to "Jewish loss of life,"⁴⁶ while the Irgun massacred 250 civilians, including women and children, in the village of Deir Yassin.⁴⁷ For the British, then the occupying power, these groups were terrorists; for most Jews, however, they were patriots whose exploits enabled the founding of Israel (Menachem Begin, the Stern Gang's leader,

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 the Israeli occupation, with the sole 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), 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 also deflects attention from the nonreligious sources of rage and violence, as in the Palestinians’ (secular) struggle for a homeland. Portraying Palestinian suicide bombers as religious fanatics with an uncontrollable death-wish nicely deflects attention 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 Fanon argued.⁴⁹ 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. As a result, 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] ... homogene-

ity” 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 overdrawn. As journalist Robert Fisk 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.⁵³

History thus is repeating itself in Israel-Palestine, but most of us have 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 upon other (material) forms of power, hegemony always will be able to make opportunistic distinctions between terrorism and freedom struggles.⁵⁴ In fact, this power to define also allows political dissent to be recast as terrorism or as conducive to terrorism. Thus, Muslim criticisms of certain American policies (e.g., 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.”⁵⁵ Such a move 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), and also ignores the fact that oppression breeds its own modes of resistance.

Finally, not just “terrorism,” but even wars that we think of as just, such as the American “war against terrorism,”⁵⁶ involve practices that the medieval Islamic doctrine of jihad regarded as unjust, such as endangering civilians and killing noncombatants. 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 by Muslims as terroristic and unjust.

The Politics of Misrecognition

Average Americans cannot distinguish conceptually between jihad, holy war, and terrorism largely because they know little or nothing about Islam.

However, what is less clear are the reasons for their ignorance, given the 14 centuries of encounter between Islam and what we now call “the West.” One reason, in my opinion, is the West’s “willful politics of misrecognition” of Islam. Historically, this politics has taken the form either of positing a radical difference between Islam and Judaism/Christianity, or of 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 confuses jihad with terrorism, and the second mistranslates it as “holy war.” But 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. Southern explains it,⁵⁸ the initial European misrecognition of Islam (he does not use this phrase) resulted from spatial distance – 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) were able to locate in it “the signs of a sinister conspiracy against Christianity.”⁵⁹ 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 First Crusade’s success, 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 Europeans did not attempt to engage Islam philosophically until Francis Bacon, and even then only to refute and challenge it. Southern thus summarizes European views of Islam until the end of the thirteenth century as “first Biblical and unhelpful, the second imaginative and untruthful, the third philosophical and, at least for a short period, extravagantly optimistic.”⁶³

I took this short detour 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 alter-

ity. 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 "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, rather than political, terms? 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 American and Israeli policies have bred Muslim political opposition to them)? Why else would most people pick a handful of the world's one billion Muslims, such as bin Laden, the Taliban, and the hijackers, as exemplifying "real" Islam? How else could such "Islamists" as 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" without being accused publicly of racism?⁶⁶

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 American "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 American citizens vulnerable to surveillance. I would ascribe this not only to a hyperpatriotism but also to a misrecognition of Islam and Muslims.

Challenging Interpretive Extremism

It would be naïve to accuse only the West of misreading Islam, for Muslims are equally guilty of doing so. How else can one explain the extremists' view of people like bin Laden, the hijackers, and the Taliban as exemplifying "real" Islam? How else could moderate Muslims have done nothing to contest, for instance, the Taliban's distortions of Islam? Of course these are 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, especially against women.⁶⁷ Part of my argument is that what we understand the Qur'an to be saying depends upon who reads it, how, and in what contexts. In other

words, meaning is contingent upon method and, unfortunately, what passes for an “Islamic” method for reading the Qur’an is demonstrably at odds with the criteria stipulated by the Qur’an for its own reading for instance, to say nothing of our understanding of God as Just. Further, I argue that 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, has shaped the method. 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.⁶⁸

Saying that knowledge cannot be independent of the contexts and processes of its own production is nothing 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. This approach 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, for both of these 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 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 al-mustaqim* (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.⁶⁹

The brief analysis above makes two points. First, extremist readings of the Qur’an are a function 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 of both extremist thinking and 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 to interpret Islam in ways that then victimizes them.

Sadly, most contemporary Muslims seek to wash their hands of the extremists, perhaps because of the guilt by association that many of us feel – even though such guilt should not be based upon their being Muslims but upon our disengagement from Islam, which has given extremists a free rein. Thus, as Muslims we need to do more than distance ourselves from the extremists in the wake of 9/11; we need to take responsibility for reading the Qur’an in liberatory modes to provide an alternative and egalitarian interpretative framework.

Conclusion

In sum, I believe that extremist interpretations constitute misreadings of the Qur’an, 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 (e.g., sexual equality and the freedom of conscience, religion, speech, and mutual consultation), which in fact are granted to us by the Qur’an. Paying lip service to the Qur’an’s egalitarianism while continuing to repress and oppress people in its name is not just rank hypocrisy, but a sure recipe for perpetuating the kinds of violence that, in the long-term, will spell our mutual destruction.

Notes

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 Washington, DC (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 the 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), 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 Qur’an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), 512.
12. *Ibid.*, 118.
13. *Ibid.*, 41.
14. This has not always been the case in modern times. The United States bombed Nagasaki and Hiroshima after the Japanese had broadcast their terms of surrender, and American forces shot 100,000 retreating Iraqi troops in the back during the Gulf War, with generals calling it a “duck shoot.”
15. See Asad, *Qur’an*, 1980: 41, fn. 170.
16. At the time of this verse’s revelation, Muslims were 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), 30.
21. *Ibid.*, 9.
22. Johnson, *Holy War*, 66.
23. *Ibid.*, 7.
24. *Ibid.*
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.
31. *Ibid.*, 15.
32. Francis Robinson, ed. *Cambridge Illustrated History: Islamic World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 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*, 3d ed. (London: Pluto Press, 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, 5, no. 4 (December 2001): 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*, unpublished manuscript, 2002.
38. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1988), 258-59.
39. *Ibid.*, 1407.
40. Merryl Wyn Davies, *Knowing One Another: Shaping an Islamic Anthropology* (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd., 1988), 6.
41. In the Qur'anic sense, argues Fazlur Rahman, abrogation (*naskh*) means that some verses were replaced by others at God's command. In other words, 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." Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 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: www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2000/index.cfm?docid=2453&clid=2408.
45. Charles Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 19, 140.
46. *Ibid.*, 120.
47. *Ibid.*, 143.
48. Slavok Zizek "Welcome to the Desert of the Real," (17 September 2001). Online at: <http://alt.venus.co.uk/weed/current/zizek.htm>.
49. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 196), 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* (4 December 2001). Online at: <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 that the same “jihad,” when directed against the United States, became “terrorism.” Other such examples abound.
55. In fact, both Muslims and conscientious people all over the world, including in the United States, disapprove of these policies on both ethical and political grounds. Insisting that only Muslim terrorists and fanatics oppose them reframes legitimate political dissent as religious extremism and actually 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), 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’s *What Went Wrong?* In *New York Times Book Review* (27 January 2002), 9.
67. Barlas, “Believing Women.”
68. *Ibid.*