

# Violence in the Islamic world

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The Islamic world is immersed in a crisis that will take years to overcome. Whatever the reasons might be, the truth is that only a few Muslim-majority countries are free of the scourge of violence. Besides, at least ten of them have stable foundations of terrorist organisations. The word *Islam* comes from the same root as *Salam* (peace), because it suggests an absolute dedication to God (=Islam), which produces “peace” in the heart and eternal peace, receiving Paradise as a reward for such dedication. If this is so, what arguments lead terrorists to commit such atrocities? Their (un-) reasonableness must be unmasked, Gulf countries that defend their criminal code despite their condemnation of terrorism reported and Islamic leaders’ counter-discourse promoted in order to ideologically counter-act this bigotry.

All this, taking into account that western countries share some responsibility

in the creation of these groups. Their colonial history, their fight against the USSR in Afghanistan with the support of what ended up becoming Al-Qaeda, or Iraq’s invasion along with Syria’s outbreak, which has led to the creation of IS are some examples. However, western countries did not create the radical Islamic ideology but relied on the support of groups which handled it. For the sake of religion, ideological struggle against those who hijack Islam is needed.

## **Urgent need to analyse the discourses**

We often hear that “violence has nothing to do with Islam”, that the cause of violence is the fight for the political hegemony between Syria and Iran, economic interests, geostrategical reasons, problems with Muslims’ social integration in Europe or

psychological problems of some. Well, saying this is the equivalent of saying that the Crusades or the Inquisition had nothing to do with Christianity, that it was just a fight for power in the Mediterranean. Each religion has the duty of analysing and recognising which elements of their speech foster radicalism and, therefore, report them as a misrepresentation of their own history.

We face two opposites: terrorism, which assures that “Islam is sword” and its counter-discourse built on a pacifist mythicizing of its origins. If the first argument is anachronistic, the second one does not stand the historical critique nor classic Islamic literature about the period of conquests. Besides, we can assert that the expansion of Islamic civilisation aimed to spread its domains rather than its faith. We know that the process of islamisation of conquered societies was extremely slow. Even in Maghreb or Al-Andalus, where it occurred at a higher rate, it took a century to obtain the conversion of half the population. The Koranic principle that says: “there is no place for [violent] coercion in [order to impose one’s own] religion” was generally respected.

The concept of jihad was initially used to legitimate military campaigns but as the Islamic Empire began to stabilize, relying in the same Koran, it started transforming into a defensive struggle between individual and spiritual jihad (Great jihad against temptations which separate from Islam) and collective and military jihad (Small jihad against Islam’s enemies). This way of understanding jihad is nowadays majoritarian and normative. It is the best way of addressing Koran at the present time. One of the Muslim Brotherhood’s leaders in France, Moncef Zenati, has asserted that the violence of the times of the proph-

et has to be left behind and that nowadays only self-defence can be accepted. Lets take a brief look to the discourse about violence.

## **The conflictual context of Islam’s origins**

Islam’s first century (seventh century a.D.) lived turbulent times from the very beginning of revelation: conflicts with other peoples and conflicts within emerging Islam itself. This unrest has undoubtedly expressed itself in the Koran.

The prophet and his first companions had to leave The Mecca because its inhabitants denied their prophetic message. In Medina (year 622), he was acclaimed as a leader and judge between the different tribes that inhabited the region. The constitution claimed by moderate Islam supported the coexistence of Muslims, Jews and pagans. However, two years after, according to tradition, the response to the prophet’s leadership erupted. Several Jewish and pagan tribes fought against him. The prophet organised a dozen of military campaigns, some of which were defensive and some offensive, like the failed campaigns for the conquest of Jerusalem (probably for messianic reasons) and Syria.

His death (year 632) caused a dispute for leadership, which forced the caliph Abu Bakr to fight constant rebellions during his two-year mandate. The caliphs Umar and Uzman extended their empire to the West (Egypt, Israel and Syria) and to the East (Iraq and Iran), but were also constantly opposed, specially by those who supported Alí, Muhammad’s son-in-law: both caliphs were murdered. Finally Alí was designated as the caliph but he and

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his sons were murdered too. In the end, a hereditary caliphate was established in Damascus (661). Its stability and capacity to assume Hellenist, byzantine and Persian cultures enhanced Arab culture.

### **The Koran shows the conflicts of that time**

The wars against Jewish tribes have been expressed in texts such as: «You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward the believers [to be] the Jews and those who associate others with Allah; and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, “We are Christians”» (K. 5,82).

Although the Prophet's preaching at The Mecca was mainly religious, about God's uniqueness in conformity with previous prophets and about the final judgement, when arrived to Medina, the discourse was complemented with political, legal and military elements. Muhammad's «reign» was, in fact, «of this world» and hence, unlike Jesus, he had to elaborate civil and criminal laws for his incipient Empire. Some of Islam's integration problems have their root in the consecration of certain corporal punishments in the Koran as divine criminal law.

One current example: Tunisian president recently proposed the abolishment of historical legacy inequality, according to which a woman receives half the amount of her brother, but both his own country's ulemas and Egypt's al-Azhar great rector stated that this proposal was against Koran. If Koran's religious-civil-criminal law is God's revealed truth, how can Islam turn to an appropriate religion for a different world? Sunnites have no alternative but to discuss about their clas-

sical legal interpretation of troublesome verses. This is the foundation of reformist and modernist Islam.

### **Classical interpretation regulates the right to war**

Islam after the Prophet sought a regulation to war based on his preaching and on koranic revelations. *Lex talionis* (an eye for an eye) is kept as an essential concept of justice (K. 5,45/2,178) following Judaism.

Obviously, during the expansion period, military laws could not be pacific but tried to avoid excesses: women and children could not be murdered, a war could not be started without a previous «call to Islam» and other monotheist religions were allowed in exchange for a tax. This legal system shaped a «knighthood moral» which also inspired Christian literature of the same name.

Any collection of the Prophet's sayings and every classic book about Islamic law (*fiqh*) includes a chapter about the jihad that sets limits to this struggle in «God's ways».

### **Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State: tactician violence and purist violence**

These two terrorist organisations have competed for the hegemony of global jihadism apart from some military confrontations between them. There is no doubt that the Islamic State has won the battle of discourse. On one hand due to its domain of social networks and language and on the other due to its ideological purism against Al-Qaeda's tac-

tics. This latest group appears as tolerant, as it is capable of reaching agreements with any violent movements whatever Islamic legal tradition they belong to. In opposition, the Islamic State paints itself as «pure Islam». IS has carried out many public executions of homosexual, unfaithful or apostate Muslims -amongst others- to defend this purism. However, they make serious mistakes against classic laws such as burning a Jordan pilot alive, as this punishment is strictly reserved to God's judgment in hell.

### **Counter-discourse after New York's attack**

Al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks along with conflicts between Shiite o Sunni Muslims rose internal and external questioning about their attitude towards violence. Back in 2004, the Declaration of Amman marked the beginning of a series of agreements and joint declarations concerning peace within the Islamic world. 180 Muslim leaders from all over the world met in Jordan and stated: 1) Both Sunnism and Chiism must be considered as legitimate forms of Islam 2) Extremist *fatwas* were condemned and the characteristics that a Muslim leader must fulfil in order to issue a *fatwa* were set 3) *Takfirism* (considering another Muslim as an apostate), widely used by terrorists to justify their violence, was also condemned. In short, terrorism was explicitly condemned. The Muslim Brotherhood's ideologist (Qaradawi) said in 2005 against al-Qaeda's terrorism in London: «Even in times of war, when two state armies oppose each other, killing women, children, old people, priests or farmers (civilians in the end) is prohibited ».

Soon afterwards, also from Jordan, the following decrees about armed jihad were made: 1) Non-combatants cannot be considered as an objective 2) A person's or group's religion is not a reason for war 3) Aggression is forbidden although the use of force may be justified in self-defence. The list of documents in this spirit is endless.

Ultimately, terrorism's perverse argumentation strategies consist in 1) considering unlawful any pact with non-Muslims (which, at a time, is contrary to Muhammad's practise in Medina even with pagans). Unless they rectify, the fight against them is obliged. And 2) Systematically omitting references to mercy in koranic verses about war. They often cite: «And kill them wherever you overtake ... Such is the recompense of the disbelievers » (K. 2,191) and intentionally omit the following part: «And if they cease, then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful ». Or even, after saying: « [As for] the thief, the male and the female, amputate their hands...» (K. 5,38) they forget: « But whoever repents after his wrongdoing and reforms, indeed, Allah will turn to him in forgiveness. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful ».

In conclusion, although Islam does not share Jesus' extreme pacifism, as an armed defence may be a duty for a Muslim (K. 2,216) and never for a Christian –who can be excused but not obliged-, it must be interpreted within UN's concept of legitimate right of self-defence. Within these parameters Islam can be lived as a twenty-first century peaceful religion. The life of most Muslims is a proof of that.

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