

# AGAINST TERRORISM AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

## MUSLIM POSITION AND RESPONSIBILITIES

### I. OUR POSITION ON TERRORISM

Humanity lives today in an interdependent and interconnected world where peaceful and fair interaction, including interfaith and intra-faith dialogue, is imperative. A grave threat to all of us nowadays is the scourge of religious and political extremism that manifests itself in various forms of violence, including terrorism. In the absence of a universally agreed upon definition of terrorism, it may be defined as any act of indiscriminate violence that targets innocent people, whether committed by individuals, groups or states.

As Muslims, we must face up to our responsibility to clarify and advocate a faith-based, righteous and moral position with regard to this problem, especially when terrorist acts are perpetrated in the name of Islam. The purpose of this brochure is to clarify a few key issues relating to this topic, not because of external pressures or for the sake of “political correctness”, but out of our sincere conviction of what Islam stands for. To this end, the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA), an Islamic juristic body, issued a fatwa (religious ruling) on July 28th, 2005 which affirmed its long standing position on this issue, and was unequivocal in its condemnation of terrorism by stating: “Islam strictly condemns religious extremism and the use of violence against innocent lives. There is no justification in Islam for extremism or terrorism.” Stating that it was issued “following the guidance of our scripture, the Qur’an, and the teachings of our Prophet Muhammad—peace be upon him”, the religious ruling confirmed the following salient principles: [1] All acts of terrorism, including those targeting the life and property of civilians, whether perpetrated by suicidal or any other form of attacks, are haram (forbidden) in Islam. [2] It is haram for a Muslim to cooperate with any individual or group that is involved in any act of terrorism or prohibited violence. [3] It is the civic and religious duty of Muslims to undertake full measures to protect the lives of all civilians, and ensure the security and well-being of fellow citizens. Recently, similar declarations against terrorism have been issued by religious scholars and leaders in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.

Irrespective of the legitimacy of grievances relating to aggression or oppression, **terrorism is the epitome of injustice because it targets innocent people.** Ends do not justify means, and innocent civilians should never pay the price for the misdeeds of others or be used as pawns in settling political or military conflicts. Muslims are bound by the Qur’anic prohibitions of taking an innocent life [Qur’an: 5:32; 17:33], considered as one of the gravest sins in Islam. Furthermore, the Qur’an clearly demands that Muslims act justly and impartially, even when dealing with an enemy [4:135, 5:8].

### II. CLARIFYING RELATED ISSUES

**i. Jihad is not to be equated with terrorism.** Contrary to common misperceptions and mistranslations, the word jihad does not mean “Holy War” or war that is justified by differences in religious convictions. **The Arabic equivalent of “Holy War” is never mentioned in the Qur’an.** There is nothing “holy” about war, and it is described in the Qur’an as a hated act [2:216]. The Qur’anic Arabic term jihad and its derivatives

mean, literally, **to strive or exert effort.** These terms are used in the Qur’an and Hadith [prophetic sayings] in three specific contexts: first, in addressing **inward jihad** or the struggle against evil inclinations within oneself [22:77-78; 29:4-7]; second in the context of **social jihad**, or striving for truth, justice, goodness and charity [25:52; 49:15]; and third, in the **context of the battlefield**, which is often referred to in the Qur’an as Qital [fighting]. Combative jihad is allowed in the Qur’an for legitimate self-defense in the face of unprovoked **aggression** or in resisting **severe oppression**, on religious or other grounds [2:190-194; 22:39-41]. No verse in the Qur’an, when placed in its proper textual and historical context, permits fighting others on the basis of their faith, ethnicity or nationality.

Several stringent criteria must be met before combative jihad can be initiated. To begin with, as a “hated act”, war should only be undertaken as a last resort after all other means have failed. Next, **jihad cannot be randomly declared by individuals or groups, but rather by a legitimate authority** after due consultation. Finally, the intention of Muslims engaging in combative jihad must be pure, not tainted by **personal or nationalistic agendas.** But even during a wartime situation, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and of the first caliph, Abu Bakr (r), laid down clear guidelines of humane behavior on the battlefield. These guidelines forbid the targeting of non-combatants, specifically the elderly, children, women, unarmed civilians and clergy, and the destruction of infrastructure. [Sunan Abi Dawood (Bab Al-Jihad); also Tareekh Al-Tabari].

Whereas war should be undertaken as a last resort to prevent a greater wrong, the ideal and general rule of Muslim behavior is peaceful co-existence with others in kindness and justice [60:8-9]. Indeed, the Qur’an **recognizes plurality** in human societies, including religious plurality, as part of God’s plan in creation [10:19; 11:118-119]. This is why God calls for **peaceful and respectful dialogue**, not forced conversion whether through war or other forms of coercion [2:256; 3:64; 16:125; 29:46].

It is unfortunate that both extremists and detractors of Islam who distort the meaning of jihad propagate a false concept of jihad through expressions such as “jihadists”, “Islamic terrorism”, or references by terrorists to jihad. Such stereotyping and the use of terms such as “Islamic terrorist” are as unfair as referring to Timothy McVeigh as a “Christian terrorist”, or claiming that abortion clinic bombers committed acts of “Christian terrorism”. During the course of Muslim history, as has happened with similar norms in other societies and civilizations, the above rules of jihad were violated at different times and in differing degrees. However, the fact remains that **Islamic teachings are to be based neither on the actions of some present or past Muslims, nor on past or present misinterpretations, but rather on the moral principles embodied in Islam’s primary authentic sources.**

**ii. Islam does not consider people of other faiths “infidels”, and does not advocate violence against them.** First, the term “infidel” refers loosely to “someone having no religious faith, an atheist”. This word and its meaning are totally

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incompatible with the Qur'anic statement that the People of the Book [Jews and Christians] believe in the same universal God as Muslims [29:46]. Moreover, the term infidel is not a correct translation of the Qur'anic term "Kafir", which means, literally, to cover up or to reject [a belief which is incompatible with one's own]. It is used in the Qur'an in various contextual meanings: some are neutral, where farmers are called Kuffar since they cover up the seeds with soil [57:20], some are positive, like rejecting or disbelieving in idolatry [2:256; 60:4], some refer to the rejection of belief in God, and others refer to rejecting a particular prophet while confessing belief in God.

Second, nowhere does the Qur'an call for violence against anyone merely on the grounds that he/she rejected Islam [2:256; 88:21-22; 6:107-108; 42:48]. All verses cited by the users of a "cut-and-paste" approach to claim otherwise (such as 9:5; 29:123), refer to a historical reality when groups or nations from various religious backgrounds engaged in hostilities and aggression against the nascent Muslim community during the Prophet's (p) time. Understanding that historical context and careful textual analysis leave no doubt that the permission to fight back had nothing to do with the religious convictions of these groups or nations, but was due rather to their aggression and gross oppression; it was a state security imperative. **Even if some Muslims have disregarded these clear Qur'anic limits, Islam provides no justification, and cannot be blamed, for such actions.**

Third, it is a disingenuous and misleading tactic to focus exclusively on verses that deal with the contingencies of legitimate self-defense, and to ignore the repeated and consistent statements in the Qur'an that emphasize the **sanctity of human life** [5:32], **respect for human dignity** [17: 70], **acceptance of plurality**, including plurality of religious convictions [5:48; 11:118], peaceful co-existence with all [60:8-9], universal and unbiased justice even with the enemy [4:135; 5:8], **universal human brotherhood** [49:13] and **mercy to all creation** [21:107]. The Qur'an is a whole and cohesive book, and should not be interpreted in a piecemeal fashion.

**iii. Muslims are to act as responsible citizens.** It is a well established Islamic principle that citizens of a nation, regardless of its religious makeup, are required not only to uphold the laws of that country, but also to safeguard and protect the security and well being of the country and its people. This principle has recently been reiterated in several statements by the European Council of Ifta' and Research. This Council has called upon Muslim residents and citizens of Western countries to be faithful to the [social] contract according to which they were admitted as residents or naturalized as citizens, since fulfilling one's contracts is a religious duty according to the Qur'an, Hadith and the consensus of Muslim Jurists [see 5:1, 3:76, 17:34, as well as the concluding statements of the Council's 11th meeting in Stockholm, January 22-26, 2003, and its 14th meeting in Dublin, February 23-27, 2005]. Acts of terror by citizens of a country are condemnable both because these inflict violence on innocent people, and are treacherous actions that betray the very nature of citizenship.

**iv. Islam prohibits religious extremism.** Extremism is contrary to the Qur'anic directive to Muslims to be a justly balanced community of believers (*ummatah wasata*) so that, through the example of their lives, they may bear witness to the truth before all humankind [2:143]. This verse affirms beyond any doubt that the prescribed course for the Muslim community is the balanced middle way. All extreme tendencies are to be avoided. This injunction towards moderation and balance is emphasized repeatedly in other verses and in the practices and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (p), with reference to areas such as worship, duties to family, marriage, and other affairs. In fact, he specifically warned against extremism and exaggeration in religion (*ghulow*), saying: "Ruined are those who insist on hardship in matters of faith", and instructing his followers to: "Always follow a middle course, whereby you will reach your goal" (Sahih Al-Bukhari). It is these enlightened characteristics of moderation and tolerance, and the inclusion of the contributions of other faith communities and societies that led to the flowering of creativity, knowledge, and invention during several centuries and had a major influence upon the Renaissance.

**v. Muslims are part of the universal human family and are committed to co-existing in peace and justice.** Beyond rejecting intolerance and extremism, Islam seeks to bring together people of different races, nationalities and religions, leav-

ing the judgment of theological "correctness" of any person or community to God alone on the Day of Reckoning. While the Qur'an speaks about brotherhood of faith [49:10], it also speaks (in the same chapter) about a broader human family: "O humankind! We (God) have created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know one another. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous (or God-conscious) of you. Surely, God is All-Knowing, All-Aware" (49:13; see also 30:22). Note that this verse does not address Muslims exclusively, but rather begins with the inclusive term "O humankind," which embraces all people. It reminds humanity that they belong to one family with the same set of parents, albeit a diverse family, and that their differences are to be celebrated, not causes for division. It is also a reminder that diversity in unity and unity within diversity are possible. This sweeping statement in the Qur'an about a broad human family is a profound basis for peace for and among all people. Beyond stressing the common family roots of all, a basic rule governing the relationship between Muslims and people of other faiths is that of peaceful coexistence, justice and compassion [60:8-9]. This verse lays out the duty of Muslims to treat others who are living with them in peace with equity (*qist*) and *birr*. The term *birr* and its derivatives are the same expressions used in the Qur'an and Hadith to refer to one's relationship with one's parents. Such a relationship is more than kindness, since it also includes love and respect. Building and nurturing this spirit of *birr* is a cornerstone in the fight against terrorism and religious extremism.

### III. COUNTERING TERRORISM AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM: MUSLIMS' RESPONSIBILITIES

It is incumbent upon all Muslims to uphold and clarify the correct position of Islam on issues such as terrorism and religious extremism. As the fatwa from FCNA explained, we must also take whatever steps we can to combat these scourges. These include the following:

- Educate Muslims, especially leaders and imams, about relevant Islamic teachings, societal concerns and responsive initiatives relating to terrorism and religious extremism.
- Publicize FCNA's "Anti-Terrorism and Anti-Religious Extremism Fatwa" in the community, understand it and encourage every mosque and Islamic educational entity across the country to endorse it.
- Hold leaders responsible for un-Islamic teachings, and encourage them to seek training from institutions such as the ILDC [ISNA Leadership Development Center] or advice from FCNA.
- Organize youth outreach programs that provide clarification on the Islamic position regarding terrorism and religious extremism.
- Build and promote relationships and interaction with law enforcement officials, including sensitivity and diversity training.
- Reach out to our neighbors and interfaith institutions to create better understanding and cooperation.
- Forge alliances with national and international Islamic institutions to develop, promote, and implement a global, unified Muslim platform and initiatives against terrorism and religious extremism.

### IV. AN APPEAL TO PEOPLE OF ALL FAITHS

In the interest of justice and positive change, we also request our neighbors and friends from other faiths to support us in this effort by speaking out against the recent backlash and widespread demonization of Islam and Muslims. Islamophobic statements and actions punish and victimize the entire global community of Muslims for the actions of a few, and hinder our efforts to provide a moderate voice, and promote mutual understanding and peace. Let us also not shy away from critically and honestly examining relevant issues of injustice, oppression, and the dehumanization of one another, all of which provide fertile ground for extremism, hate and ultimately senseless and indiscriminate violence. Let us realize that understanding is not the same as justifying, for there is absolutely no religious, political or other conceivable justification for any act of terrorism. The vicious cycle of violence in our interconnected world has to be broken, and we must work together to do so through mutual understanding and constructive dialogue, rather than allowing those who would divide us through hate to achieve their goals. It is the only hope for bringing about real and genuine mutual respect, justice, and peace, God Willing.

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