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The Fundamentalist Distortion of the Islamic Message

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Abstract

This paper is an in depth research into the phenomenon of the Islamic fundamentalist evoking the powerful symbolism involved in religious doctrine, to impart his warped message of militancy. Messages of Osama bin Laden are considered as the archetypical fundamentalist extremist, but with a view to finding points of departure from religious sources, particularly in the classical literature of Islam. The article delineates the aberrant pattern of fundamentalist dogma, which is unfortunately widely considered to be the prevalent Islamic ideology, particularly in the West. This research is part of the effort on behalf of the author, to differentiate between Islamic and fundamentalist beliefs as separate entities.

Keywords: Islam, Fundamentalism, Terrorism, Religious sources

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It is important to understand the sources of Islamic divine law and their epistemological evolution, to comprehend how the fundamentalist discourse tries to gain its legitimacy. Muslim fundamentalists seldom engage in formal religious training; they are also anti-progressive, inasmuch they tend to regress from Islam's standards of religious education to a home grown mixture of ideology. They decry intellectual processes like independent reasoning (Ijtihad), which was a coveted tool for Islamic schools of law since antiquity. However, fundamentalists keep coming back to "tradition," as the linchpin in their ideology.

Maxime Rodinson succinctly sums this up as a dominant fundamentalist theme:-

'Islamic fundamentalism upholds a real model; albeit one that is 14 centuries old. It's a hazy ideal. When you ask Islamic fundamentalists, "You say that you have answers that transcend socialism and capitalism-what are they?" they always respond with the same very vague exhortations, which can be based on two or three verses of the Qur'an or hadith-poorly interpreted in general.'¹

Since the fundamentalist message carries so much media space and generates huge interest, the popular conception of Islam tends to devolve around the fundamentalist strain of thought, which is as far away from truth as possible. The anti-Western message in fundamentalist propaganda gets repetitiously conveyed, with comparably minimal mention of the damage to the Islamic heritage.²

Khaled M. Abou El Fadl has made an assessment of the implications of the weakening of Islamic progressive thought process:-

"Muslim connections to the epistemology, processes, and products of their intellectual heritage have been severed in the modern age... It is not that this intellectual heritage was ideal or free of problems, but that its ethical and moral potential is far superior to anything that replaced it."³ Unfortunately, the vacuum has been taken up largely by the fundamentalist discourse, which has cast grave aspersions on the Islamic world in general, and on Islamic theology

¹ Gilbert Achcar, Peter Drucker, "Maxime Rodinson on Islamic 'Fundamentalism': An Unpublished Interview with Gilbert Achcar," Middle East Report, No. 233, (Winter, 2004), 2-4 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1559443>

² Any study of fundamentalism would not be complete without mention of the five monumental volumes edited by Martin Marty and Scott Appleby and published by University of Chicago Press: *Fundamentalisms Observed* (1991), *Fundamentalisms and Society* (1993), *Fundamentalisms and the State* (1993), *Accounting for Fundamentalisms* (1994), and *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (1995). For a major publication specifically on Islamic fundamentalism see Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

³ Khaled M. Abou El Fadl, *Conference of the Books: The Search for Beauty in Islam* (Lanham and Oxford: University Press of America, 2001), p. xvii.

and its relationship with the mundane world specifically. The liberating tradition of acquisition of knowledge, related to great thinkers like Al-Ghazzali, has been superseded by the polarized thought process of radical thinkers. This can largely be attributed to Muslim scholars themselves, since Muslim intelligentsia had gradually developed an apathetic disregard of Islamic philosophy, with the consequential effect of vacating the centre stage to the radicals. Debatably, if the Muslim brand of philosophy had continued in its former progressiveness, it would have been harder for the modern fundamentalist project to proceed as much as it has today. Though there are several factors behind the exponential rise of fundamentalism, the dearth of modern scholarship, supplementing the already rich classical Islamic literature, can certainly be considered one. This has opened the way for 'neo-scholars' to project their deontological versions of Islam as the only real ones.

Amir Taheri also gives a persuasive account of the influence of Muslim ideologists such as Maulana Maudoodi of Pakistan (1903-1979) and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt (1906-1966) on current Islamic mass culture: "Although Mr. Maudoodi and Mr. Qutb were not serious thinkers, they could at least offer a coherent ideology based on a narrow reading of Islamic texts. Their ideas about Western barbarism and Muslim revival, distilled down to bin Ladenism, became mere slogans designed to incite zealots to murder. People like Mr. Maudoodi and Mr. Qutb could catch the ball and run largely because most Muslim intellectuals of their generation (and later) had no interest in continuing the work of Muslim philosophers."⁴

Abdolkarim Soroush, a renowned scholar, delves into the fossilization of the Islamic paradigm, and why that is not desirable:-

"The prophet of Islam is the last of prophets, and his religion is the last of religions. However, no jurisprudent [faqih] and interpreter [mofassir] is the last of jurisprudents or interpreters."⁵

Divergence Between Classical Islam and Fundamentalism

Islam does not lay down boundaries between religious and social values; its laws cover not only the ritual, but practically every aspect of life, including the mundane. Four main sources of Islamic law in decreasing order of importance are the Quran, as the supreme source, Sunnah or the life of the Prophet as an example to be followed, the consensus of the Muslims as a community or a polity (Ijma) and reasoning by analogy (Qiyas). Another important source which has been relegated to lesser importance, but perhaps which is most

⁴ Amir Taheri, "The Death of bin Ladenism," New York Times, 11 July 2002.

⁵ Mahmoud and Ahmad Sadri, Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush, a translation (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37.

important in the prevailing context is 'Ijtihad'. This is the process of making a legal decision, by independent interpretation of the legal sources in the context of prevailing circumstances.

In the following treatise, I try to take up the case of the fundamentalist distortion of the Islamic message, which is used to propagate their particular brand of intolerant ideology. Since he is the most well known archetype of the fundamentalist, I will examine extracts of Osama Bin Laden's messages to the world; with a view to analyzing the fundamentalist created cognitive dissonance with respect to Islam.

The Quran, as supreme source of divine Islamic sanction, is considered inviolate. Barring a few exceptions, Quran gives fundamental principles without touching subsidiary laws. Though it is hardly accurate or comparable, in lay terms, it can be considered as a kind of divine constitution, which deliberately leaves space for secondary legislation to fill in the spaces not touched upon by textualism. The Quran enjoins upon the Muslims to consult among themselves in the affairs of society.⁶ While he lived, The Prophet Muhammad devised subsidiary laws in consultation with his companions. The enforcement of the basic laws was followed by the formulation of subsidiary laws bearing directly on the prevailing conditions. Those basic laws were unchangeable, but subsidiary laws were supposed to change with the variation in circumstances. New subsidiary laws had to be deduced to satisfy fresh social, political and economic developments.

After his death, the process had to go on. Quran says, 'Muhammad is but a Rasool (messenger) there have been several Rasools before him. Will you turn back on your heels if he dies or is slain?'⁷ Thus, the process of evolution of the recently founded Islamic community had to not just proceed, but to increase its scope drastically to meet the demands of an umma that had started expanding from a city state to an Islamic kingdom. This was the ushering in of the era of Muslim juristic thought, with its intense concentration on acquisition of knowledge and rationalisation of the Islamic way of life. The modern fundamentalist is anti-historical in the sense that he tries to recreate an Islamic paradigm, going against the very spirit of Islamic life he is trying to emulate. In the early centuries of Islam, the quest for knowledge was paramount in juristic thought; in fundamentalist discourse it is absent, or at best, present in a warped state.

In contemporary Islamic fundamentalism all the emphasis is on ritualism, divested of its epistemic doctrinal context. The Quran is thus read entirely in focus with its practical injunctions, most of which were designed to be responses to specific events unfolding in Islamic polity at that particular moment in time. Thus, the Quran's heavily doctrinal and tolerant side is

⁶ The Quran 3:158

⁷ The Quran 3:143

marginalized. The Hadith also get the same selective treatment; the quest for knowledge which was an extremely potent element of the doctrine is underplayed, in favour of selective militant paradigms.⁸

In classical scholarship the Quranic verse that says "Travel in the land and see how He originated creation, then Allah bringeth forth the later growth",⁹ connoted the quest for all forms of scholarship.¹⁰

Al-Ghazzali, one of Islam's finest mystics and theologian, wrote a book on "Knowledge," quoting an extensive list of early authorities of Islam, which all exhort the pursuit of knowledge as Islam's finest accomplishment.¹¹ This was largely the paradigm that classical Islamic scholarship followed; the quest for knowledge preceding the comprehension and assimilation of doctrine. This is the exact anti-thesis of relatively modern variants of Islam such as Wahabism and Salafism, which are based on blind adherence to ritualism. Both these variants stress strongly on an Islamic identity, which can be differentiated from the non-Islamic one only by strict adherence to ritualism. Thus, the stress shifts from understanding the 'why' to be a Muslim to the 'how' of being a Muslim. Abdolkarim Soroush is quite right in saying that:-

"I believe that the Islam of identity should yield to the Islam of truth. The latter can coexist with other truths; the former, however, is, by its very nature, belligerent and bellicose. It is the Islam of war, not the Islam of peace. Two identities would fight each other, while two truths would cooperate".¹²

In the "Islam of truth" model that he proposes, ritualism becomes a result of knowledge, not a precursor of it; unless an act is preceded by logical, informed reasoning, it becomes void of its certainty. Thus, in order to have appreciation of the ritual being performed, it has to be preceded by a comprehension of what it entails.¹³

The Quranic Approach Towards Religious Coercion:

⁸ Vincent J. Cornell, "Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: The Relationship between Faith and Practice in Islam," in John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford History of Islam* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 90.

⁹ The Quran 29:20.

¹⁰ For more details see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), and *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd, 1976).

¹¹ *The Book of Knowledge, Being a Translation with Notes of the Kitab al-'Ilm of al-Ghazzali's Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, by Nabih Amin Faris, 2d rev. ed. (Lahore: Sh. M. Ashraf, 1966):

¹² Mahmoud and Ahmad Sadri, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, p. 24. See also Forough Jahanbakhsh, "Abdolkarim Soroush: New 'Revival of Religious Sciences,'" *ISIM Newsletter* 8 (2001):21.

¹³ *The Book of Knowledge*, vol. 1, p. 15.

The Quran is inviolate to Muslims. They universally consider its text unchanged and irrevocable over the centuries. If the Quran is picked up, there are a much larger number of surahs which ordain clemency and peace, and there are certainly none which sanction the murder of innocent bystanders or terrorism.

If non-Muslims disagree with the message of Islam, Muslims are not allowed to employ any method of intimidation or compulsion, "There shall be no coercion in matters of faith."¹⁴

"Thus, (O' Prophet) if they dispute with thee, say, 'I have surrendered my whole being unto Allah, and (so have) all who follow me. And ask all those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime, as well as all unlettered people, 'Have you (too) surrendered yourselves unto Him?' And if they surrender themselves unto Him, they are on the right path; but if they turn away, thy duty is no more than to deliver the message."¹⁵

"And had thy Sustainer willed, all those who live on earth would surely have attained to faith, all of them. Wilt thou then force men till they are believers?"¹⁶

"And say: 'the truth (has now come) from your Sustainer. Let, then, him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it."¹⁷

Thus, Muslims are not only prohibited from imposing their faith on non-Muslims, Islam instructs them to treat non-Muslims with kindness: "As for such (of the unbelievers) as do not fight against you on account of (your) faith, and neither drive you forth from your homelands, Allah does not forbid you to show them kindness and to behave towards them with full equity: for, verily, Allah loves those who act equitably. "Allah only forbids you to turn in friendship towards such as ***fight against you because of (your) faith, and drive you forth from your homelands***, or aid (others) in driving you forth: and as for those (from among you) who turn towards them in friendship, it is they, they who are truly wrongdoers."¹⁸(Emphasis added)

In fact, the Quran goes to the extent of forbidding Muslims from using any insulting remarks about any deity worshiped by any non-Muslim. It says, "But do not revile those (beings) whom they invoke instead of Allah."¹⁹

The Fundamentalist Communicative Strategy:

Fundamentalism has gotten to where it is today, by exploiting the powerful symbolism associated with traditional religious terms (takfir, jihad, hijra,

¹⁴ The Quran 2:56

¹⁵ The Quran 3:20

¹⁶ The Quran 10:99

¹⁷ The Quran 18:29

¹⁸ The Quran 60:8-9

¹⁹ The Quran 6:108

jahiliyya and hakimiyya) ²⁰reinterpreted in a new a-historical and ideological context, converting these into potent political tools for staring at the status quo in the eyes.²¹Salwa Isma'il makes the case for fundamentalist Islamic discourse challenging the political power structures, essentially by mobilizing religious sentiment to deconstruct the existing normative boundaries. Essentially, fundamentalist discourse has re defined the parameters of the discord between culture and politics. Thus, legitimacy of political power springs only from the fundamentalist version of *Sbaria*, since any other strain will not suffice.

The archetype of the case in point being discussed above would have to be, of course, Osama Bin Laden himself. Examining his various messages conveyed through media, letters and internet over time, it appears that he gets around the Quranic messages of tolerance and compassion by three methods: Firstly, he juxtaposes his own radical philosophy with those verses of the Quran, which specifically ordered practical steps to be taken in response to a particular problem, in a context sometimes hundreds of years old. These are usually Medinite verses which were revealed to the Prophet when the Muslim Polity was in danger of being invaded by the Meccans, after the hijrat or the migration of the fledgling Muslim community. Thus, this was a time of the evolution of the Islamic society, and any perceived military threats had to be dealt with accordingly. The fundamentalist combines these practical injunctions with his own brand of militancy, which of course, is happening fourteen centuries later in a totally different set of circumstances.

Consider this message of Osama Bin laden:-

“Men of the radiant future of our umma of Muhammad, raise the banner of jihad up high against the Judeo-American alliance that has occupied the holy places of Islam. God told his Prophet: ‘He will not let the deeds of those who are killed for His cause come to nothing; He will guide them and put them in a good state; He will admit them into the Garden He has already made known to them.’”²²

In this message above, anti western rhetoric is combined with a verse from the Quran, which has nothing to do with the ‘Judo-American alliance’, but was revealed as a divine morale booster for Muslim casualties in a battle, and the phenomenon of the rewards of shahadat ,the concept of martyrdom in Islam.

²⁰ David Zeidan,” A Comparative Study of Selected Themes in Christian and Islamic Fundamentalist Discourses,” British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 30, No. 1, (May, 2003), pp. 43-80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3593245>.

²¹ Salwa Isma'il, Discourse and Ideology in Contemporary Egypt, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of Political Science (McGill University, 1992), pp. 1-2, 89-92, 112-116. 17

²² “A Declaration of jihad against the Americans occupying the land of the two holy sanctuaries.” in Bin Laden, Osama. *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, ed. Bruce Lawrence, Trans. James Howarth (London, Verso Press, 2005), 29.

Another convenient way out would be to quote Quran in its improper context; a verse may be partly reproduced so as to obscure its original epistemological meaning. Consider this communication from Bin Laden:- ²³

“God Most High has commanded us in many verses of the Qur'an to fight in His path and to urge the believers to do so. These are His words: "So [Prophet] fight in God's way. You are accountable only for yourself. Urge the believers on. God may well curb the power of the disbelievers, for He is stronger in might and more terrible in punishment."²⁴ and His words: "Why should you not fight in God's cause and for those oppressed men, women, and children who cry out, `Lord, rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors! By Your grace, give us a protector and helper!?"²⁵, and His words: "When you meet the disbelievers, *strike them in the neck* ... "²⁶

It is interesting to note, that if one takes the last verse about disbelievers in the form mentioned above, it could be generically applied to all who are not in the fold of Islam. This would envelop the entire non-Muslim hemisphere in the category. However, in its entirety, the verse reads:-

"When you meet the disbelievers in battle, strike them in the neck, and once they are defeated, bind any captives firmly—later you can release them by grace or by ransom—until the toils of war have ended. That [is the way]. God could have defeated them Himself if He had willed, but His purpose is to test some of you by means of others. He will not let the deeds of those who are killed for his cause come to nothing."

Thus, by quoting a verse incompletely in its improper context, what was basically a practical battle injunction, revealed in response to military exigencies, is turned into a blanket divine sanction to smite all disbelievers. This is exactly the form of cognitive dissonance that the fundamentalist wants to create in the minds of his audience. Since the most receptive listeners and readers would be radicals willing to absorb the purportedly spiritual message, this would be well received by diehards, who would hardly go into textual formalism to find out the true connotations.

A second device would be to bunch together verses which have a doctrinal message in them to convey the inherent meaning as an injunction. The message below²⁷ would also be a prime example of Jihadi ideology intertwined with Quranic verses, to give it divine sanction, the verses of course, being quoted out of the practical mundane context originally envisaged:-

²³ This message was printed under the title “The New powder Keg in the Middle east” in Nida’ul Islam, a journal edited by activists in Australia. Ibid., 41.

²⁴ The Quran 4:84.

²⁵ The Quran 4:75.

²⁶ The Quran, 47:4. Emphasis added by author.

²⁷ (Lawrence and Howarth 2005, p.42)

“All must act in order to give life to the words of the Most High: “[Messengers], this community of yours is one single community and I am your Lord, so serve Me.²⁸ And the Muslim should not be like those whom God has described with His words: “As for those who have divided their religion and broken up into factions, have nothing to do with them.”²⁹ It is essential to volunteer and not to bicker, and the Muslim should not belittle righteousness in any way....”

The following is an excerpt from an interview given by Bin Laden to Taysir Alluni, one of Al Jazeera’s most celebrated reporters. This was held at an undisclosed location south of Kabul on January 31, 2001, but was aired about three months later. Alluni, the network’s Afghanistan bureau chief, asks some incisive questions from Bin Laden during this interview, to which Osama replies with his usual dexterity in combining rhetoric with divine sanction.³⁰

“And I swear by God Almighty, that whoever walks behind Bush or his plan has rejected the teachings of Muhammad, and this ruling is one of the clearest rulings in the Book of God and the hadith of the Prophet; and I advise, as I and many other scholars have advised before, that the proof for this is the Almighty's words while addressing to the true believers: “O you who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians as allies, they are but allies to one another. And if any amongst you takes them as allies, then surely he is one of them ... ” and this is the ruling: “And if any amongst you takes them as allies, then surely he is one of them”³¹

”Verily, God guides not those people who are evil-doers.”³²

It would be worthwhile to mention that the last verse is only incompletely quoted, the complete one being: “Why would God guide people who deny the truth after they have believed and acknowledged that the Messenger is true, and after they have been shown clear proof?”

If one selectively takes away some of the part of the verse quoted above, then the underlying doctrinal context can be extracted to give the verse a practical injunction like flavour. This can then be used in an empirical Jihadi context to propagate the militant message, which is nothing but a travesty of the message that the Quranic verse originally wanted to convey.

What exactly does the terrorist seek to gain with his version of dogma? An insight on the mindset of a terrorist seeking a particular direction of ideology is explained by Khaled Abou El Fadl:-³³

²⁸ The Quran 21:92.

²⁹ The Quran 6:159.

³⁰ (Lawrence and Howarth 2005, 122)

³¹ The Quran, 5:51

³² The Quran 3:86

³³ Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Islam and the Theology of Power,” Middle East Report, No. 221, (Winter, 2001), pp. 28-33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1559337>

“Generally, terrorism is the quintessential crime of those who feel powerless seeking to undermine the perceived power of a targeted group. Like many crimes of power, terrorism is also a *hate crime*, for it relies on a polarized rhetoric of belligerence toward a particular group that is demonized to the point of being denied any moral worth. To recruit and communicate effectively, this rhetoric of belligerence needs to tap into and exploit an already radicalized discourse with the expectation of resonating with the social and political frustrations of a people. If acts of terrorism find little resonance within a society, such acts and their ideological defenders are marginalized. But if these acts do find a degree of resonance, terrorism becomes incrementally more acute and severe, and its ideological justifications become progressively more radical.”(Emphasis added)

Thus, the terrorist can be seen as a form of a revolutionary, but the type of revolution that he wants to bring about is "the sudden, violent, and drastic substitution of one group governing a territorial political entity for another group formerly excluded from the government, and an ensuing assault on state and society for the purpose of radically transforming society."³⁴

Violence is the main ingredient for change towards the 'right path'.³⁵ The state represents what is wrong with their worldview, thus violent struggle against the state concretizes the concept of the umma. Militancy is thus the preferred modus operandi to dispose of the 'corrupt' or the 'apostate' state. Accordingly Jihad is sanctioned by God, and is the last resort to restore the pristine glory of the Islamic state. Hrair Dekmejian contends that '... confrontation is an important part of the world view of Islamic fundamentalists....'³⁶

Sometimes, the fundamentalist message will contain outright distortions of fact, besides half baked truths. This results from the fact that he is trying to find a place in the Islamic micro cosmos for himself, which has never really existed in such a state before the twentieth century. The extremist's place in the Islamic mythos consequently has to be created, without too much help from classical Islamic literature. Thus, the fundamentalist is striving to legitimize his radical actions, and as divine sanction may not be so readily forthcoming, it sometimes needs to be invented. Consider this audio taped message of Bin Laden delivered to the international conference for Deobandis at Taro jaba, near Peshawar in Pakistan, held from April 9 to 11 2001. ³⁷

³⁴ Forrest D. Colbur, *The Vogue of Revolutions in Poor Countries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 6.

³⁵ Hilal Khashan, "The New World Order and the Tempo of Militant Islam," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (May, 1997), pp. 5-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/195666>

³⁶ R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Fundamentalism in the Arab World*, 2nd edn. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 22.

³⁷ (Lawrence and Howarth 2005,97)

“Scholars of Islam, however deep this wound is, however terrible these crises, there is great trust in God, for He has promised the victory of his religion and has said that there still remains a group in the Prophet's Nation [the mujahidin] that knows the truth and fights for it. The traitors and turn-coats cannot harm them until God's command comes at their hands.”

As Lawrence explains:³⁸ This is a saying attributed to the Prophet, but it is of quite doubtful validity since it is not quoted in any of the eight trusted collections of hadiths. This saying of doubtful *sabat* or validity mentions the umma splitting into schisms resulting in 72 groups of Muslims. Conveniently, only the Mujahidin will know the truth amongst the whole Muslim umma, according to this apocryphal saying.

Also consider this extract from Bin Laden's juridical edict declaring jihad against the Americans for their continued presence in Saudi Arabia:³⁹

“I meet you today in the midst of this gloomy scenario, but also in light of the tremendous, blessed awakening that has swept across the world, and particularly the Islamic world. After the scholars of Islam underwent an enforced absence—enforced due to the oppressive Crusader campaign led by America in the fear that these scholars will incite our Islamic umma against its enemies, in the same way as did the pious scholars of old (God bless their souls) such as Ibn Taymiyya and al-Izz Ibn Abd al-Salam”—this Judeo-Crusader alliance undertook to kill and arrest the righteous scholars and hardworking preachers. May God sanctify who He wishes. They killed the mujahid Sheikh Abdallah Azzam,” they arrested Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in Jerusalem, and they killed the mujahid Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman in America, as well as arresting—on the advice of America—a large number of scholars, preachers and youth in Saudi Arabia”.

Bin Laden, in this part of his message, is revisiting the purported cruelties visited upon by the Americans on the scholars of Muslim umma. It is illuminating to see that the ulema that he refers to are all radicals. Contrary to his assertion, the blind Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman (1938—) was still alive at the time this message was conveyed. He was the leader of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya ("the Islamic group") and was tied into the Egyptian Islamic Jihad of Ayman al-Zawahiri, who later became the operational second in command of Osama Bin Laden. Omer was serving a life sentence in Colorado, USA, at the time of Osama's edict. His organization was implicated in the Luxor tourist bombing, killing 62 persons. Abdullah Azzam was a noted radical and the leader of Afghan jihad, and Sheikh Yassin was the leader of Hamas.

The Fundamentalist Justifications for Terrorism:

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. p.25-6.

One would imagine that the killing of innocent people would present a great theological difficulty. As mentioned, the Quran does not in any way sanction the killing of human beings, and it is only by great distortion of theology, and gross wordplay, that this form of sanction is legitimized by fundamentalists. Even then, as this extract of an interview of Osama Bin Laden with Taysir Alluni⁴⁰ demonstrates, it is sometimes not possible to wriggle out of the religious technicalities. Sanction for innocents killed cannot come from religion, so when confronted with legitimacy of such actions, even usually vocal extremists such as bin Laden, let the lofty ideals degenerate in to a ‘vendetta’, an eye for an eye analogy.

“TA: So you say that this is an eye for an eye? They kill our innocents, so we kill theirs?”

OBL: Yes, so we kill their innocents—this is valid both religiously and logically. But some of the people who talk about this issue, discuss it from a religious point of view ...

TA: What is their proof?

OBL: They say that the killing of innocents is wrong and invalid, and for proof, they say that the Prophet forbade the killing of children and women, *and that is true*.⁴¹ It is valid and has been laid down by the Prophet in *an authentic Tradition* ...

TA: This is precisely what I'm talking about! This is exactly what I'm asking you about!

OBL: ... but this forbidding of killing children and innocents is not set in stone, and there are other writings that uphold it.

God's saying: "And if you punish (your enemy, O you believers in the Oneness of God), then punish them with the like of that with which you were afflicted ..."⁴²

The scholars and people of the knowledge, amongst them Sahib al-Ikhtiyarat [Ibn Taymiyya] and Ibn al-Qayyim, and Shawaani, and many others, and Qurtubi—may God bless him—in his Qur'an commentary, say that if the disbelievers were to kill our children and women, then we should not feel ashamed to do the same to them, mainly to deter them from trying to kill our children and women again. And that is from a religious perspective, and those who speak without any knowledge of Islamic law, saying that killing a child is not valid and whatnot, and in the full knowledge that those young men, for whom God has cleared the way, didn't set out to kill children, but rather attacked the biggest center of military power in the world, the Pentagon, which contains more than 64,000 workers, a military base which has a big concentration of army and intelligence ...”

Thus, it does seem that when confronted with the harsh realities of theological truth, the fundamentalist argument, at least in this instance, breaks

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.118-9.

⁴¹ Emphasis have been added by author.

⁴² The Quran, 16:126

down into a 'terror against terror routine.' They' kill our people, and 'we' kill theirs, an expression more reminiscent of gang warfare than a holy war. The progression of the counter arguments given by Bin Laden should be noted; he admits the prohibition against killing of innocents in Islam based on authentic and thus irrefutable prophetic tradition. He then tries to qualify what is an otherwise absolute proscription by a Quranic verse which is quoted out of context again. Then he tries to qualify his statement by reference to scholars. I would also like to point out that in the above instance; all the scholars Laden points out are of thirteenth century genealogy. Suffice it to say for now, that the teachings of all three are capable of ambiguous interpretations.

Even when Bin Laden concedes his brand of militancy to be categorized as terrorism⁴³, he still comes up with that particular strain to be a form of 'good terrorism'. It is interesting to see how he uses the analogy of 'preventive' terrorism being used to deter the American 'attacks' in Palestine:

"...not all terrorism is restrained or ill-advised. There is terrorism that is ill-advised and there is terrorism that is a good act. So, in their definition of the word, if a criminal or a thief feels that he is terrorized by the police; do we label the police terrorists and say they terrorized the thief? No, the terrorism of the police towards the criminals is a good act, and the terrorism that is being exercised by the criminals against the true believers is wrong and ill-advised. So America and Israel practise ill-advised terrorism, and we practise *good terrorism*, because it deters those from killing our children in Palestine and other places."(Emphasis added)

The practice of killing innocent civilians is further qualified by economic motives; this thread of the terrorist argument coming into play without too many Quranic quotes, since this is a relatively straightforward forewarning to civilians. One cannot help thinking of a Terrorism based 'Game Theory' model, where the coercive model is being offset by coercion in turn, leading to a desired equilibrium. The dominant theme in such a model would be generating public opinion, to mobilize pressure on the state.

"The American people should remember that they pay taxes to their government and that they voted for their president. Their government makes weapons and provides them to Israel, which they use to kill Palestinian Muslims. Given that the American Congress is a committee that represents the people, the fact that it agrees with the actions of the American government proves that America in its entirety is responsible for the atrocities that it is committing against Muslims. I demand the American people to take note of their government's policy against Muslims. They described the government's policy against Vietnam as wrong. They should now take the same stand that

⁴³ Ibid., p.120.

they did previously. The onus is on Americans to prevent Muslims from being killed at the hands of their government.”⁴⁴

Killing infidels is of course taken as a norm by terrorists. It is the murder of fellow Muslims which presents a particular theological problem. The extremist way out seems to be labelling all allegedly aberrant behaviours as apostasy. As mentioned earlier, Osama has used this method to declare practicing Muslims which do not conform to the (supposedly) ideal way of Islam as apostate. They can thus be killed with impunity without legal sanctions arising, the controversial term being *wajib-ul-Qatl*. This device was used by Bin Laden to condemn the regime in Saudi Arabia, ostensibly one of the most puritanical in the Islamic world. Obviously, cogent reasons had to be provided for being branded as apostates, which the Saudi government had done so by:-

“..its permitting the American occupiers into Saudi Arabia, and its arresting of righteous scholars—inheritors of the Prophets' legacy—and unjustly throwing them in prison. The regime has desecrated its legitimacy through many of its own actions, the most important being:

Its suspension of the rulings of the Islamic law and replacement thereof with man-made laws, and its entering into a bloody confrontation with the righteous scholars and pious youth. May God sanctify whom He pleases.

Its inability to protect the land and its allowing the enemies of God to occupy it for years in the form of the American Crusaders, who have become the principal reason for all aspects of our land's disastrous predicament.”⁴⁵

This is a blanket cover justifying all actions. When a terrorist bomb goes off, it kills indiscriminately; the terrorist has not taken care to segregate any passing devout Muslim from the so called apostates. Indeed, many acts of terror occur in mosques where there are ostensibly all Muslims present. The extremist may have been ordained theological sanction for his actions by a fatwa, or distorted indoctrination into a particular sect which views other deviant sects of Islam as apostates, such as the commonly erupting recurring sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shias in Pakistan. For Bin Laden as well as many fundamentalists, it does not take much to become branded as an apostate; after 9/11, many Muslim countries either wholeheartedly condemned the incident or sent their condolences, with the exception of a few. This was anathema to Bin Laden, who viewed such a show of solidarity with Americans as a form of apostasy. Thus, “According to Bin Laden, when the 9/11 terrorists” retaliated on behalf of their poor, oppressed sons, their brothers and sisters in Palestine and in many

⁴⁴ Bin Laden's newspaper interview, published in the Pakistani daily, *Ausaf* on November 7, 2001, and the Arabic London based paper *Al-Quds-Al-Arabi* on November 12. *Ibid.*, p.140-1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.28.

of the other lands of Islam, the whole world cried out. The infidels cried out [in protest at 9/11], and the hypocrites followed them.”⁴⁶

Here bin Laden is saying that the infidels—that is, the rest of the world—cried out in protest at 9/11. They were then followed by all those who Bin Laden sees as Muslim hypocrites, who abandon the cause of jihad by also condemning 9/11.

The degree of rigidity of fundamentalist belief can be judged by this excerpt from laden’s interview with Alluni.⁴⁷

“..because he who allies himself with the disbelievers has become an apostate, as this verse shows:

You who believe, if any of you go back on your faith, God will soon replace you with people He loves and who love Him, people who are humble towards the believers, hard on the disbelievers, and who strive in God's way without fearing anyone's reproach. Such is God's favour. He grants it to whoever He will. God has endless bounty and knowledge.⁴⁸

So I tell the Muslims to be very wary and careful about befriending Jews and Christians. Whoever helps them do so with one word, let him be devout to God, and to renew his faith so he can repent about what he did ...

TA: Even *one word*?

OBL: Even one word, whoever upholds them with one word ...

TA: Falls into this apostasy?

OBL: Falls into apostasy, a terrible apostasy, and there is no might nor power except with God ...

TA: But Sheikh, a *big part of our umma falls into this* ...

OBL: No ... No, it is not a big part. This is the rule of God, and a clear statement in His generous Book, and it is one of the clearest of rulings.

TA: And the Arab and Islamic governments ...?

OBL: Anyone that ... there is no point naming names. If you know the truth, you will know its followers. You will not know the truth by looking at men; it is in the Book of God, which is one of the constants for us. If the world becomes full of people who want to change things in it, that won't affect us or change our convictions at all. It is either truth or it is mischief. Either it is Islam or either is it disbelief. So these verses ...” (Emphasis added)

The Third way that the fundamentalist would get around the Quran, so to speak, would be by simply saying that certain verses are abrogated or are redundant. These verses would typically be the ones espousing the cause of peace and harmony amongst different communities, many of which are reproduced above. There is no getting away from the meaning of these verses,

⁴⁶ Video delivered to Al Jazeera Headquarters in Kabul, few days before the October 7, 2001 bombing assault by USA, British and French forces on Taliban held Afghanistan. Ibid., p.104.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.123.

⁴⁸ The Quran, 5:54

since they are unqualified and cannot be moulded for Jihadi purposes .By mentioning a state of emergency or the grave peril that the umma is in, the fundamentalist claims to abrogate these verses of clemency.

It is worthwhile mentioning that Al Shafi'i, one of the foremost jurists and interpreters of Hadith in classical Islamic literature, mentions that only Quran can abrogate the Quran:-

“God has declared that He abrogated [communications] of the Book only by means of other communications in it; that the Sunna cannot abrogate [a text in] the Book but it should only follow what is laid down in the Book, and that the Sunna is intended to explain the meaning of communications of general [nature] set forth [in the Book]”⁴⁹

Thus, Quran can only abrogate the Quran, as something of a higher value needs to be abrogated by something which is of equal or higher status. Even though he was responsible for the elevation of hadith as a pedestal of Islam, Shafi'i mentions clearly that hadith cannot abrogate or repudiate verses of Quran which are clear in their context.⁵⁰

“Thus God informed that He had commanded His Prophet to obey what was communicated to him, but that He did not empower him to alter [the Book] of his own accord. For there is in His saying: "It is not for me to alter it of my own accord" [The Quran 10:16], an evidence for what I stated, that nothing can abrogate the Book of God save His Book. Since [God] is the originator of His [own] commands, He [alone] can repeal or confirm whatever of it He wills—glorious be His praise—but no one of His creatures may do so. For He also said: "God repeals what He wills, or confirms; with Him is the Mother of the Book" [The Quran 13:39].⁵¹

From the point of view of practicing Muslims, which these extremists profess to be, this certainly seems quite strange since the Quran is immutable and permanent, which is universally acknowledged in the Muslim world. Thus, as mentioned in the beginning⁵², fundamentalist usage of tradition to countermand clear directions of Quran is a religious fiction, a distortion of the Islamic message.

Conclusion:

Many scholars have put forward the hypothesis that the fundamentalist project is more a pursuit of totalitarianism⁵³ than a struggle of merging the

⁴⁹ Al Shafi'i, *al Risalah* (Cairo, 1321), pp.123-24.

⁵⁰ Jacob Nuesner and Tamara Sonn, *Comparing Religions through Law; Judaism and Islam* (New York, Routledge, 1999), p.73.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² See Note 1.

⁵³ Ladan Boroumand and Roya Boroumand, “Terror, Islam, and Democracy” *Journal of Democracy* 13.2(April 2002),p.7-8.

spiritual with the temporal. It has been said to be “first and foremost an ideological and moral challenge to liberal democracy”⁵⁴, thus making it a thoroughly contemporary phenomenon “thoroughly at odds with Islamic traditions and ethics”.⁵⁵ The problem lies in the fact that the Islamic fundamentalist seems to be rather good at hermeneutics than his other counterparts. That is a huge part of the terrorist appeal; a selective reading or distortion of facts will garb the message in the respectability and irrefutability of religious sanction. There could be various modalities that impact upon this message to increase its efficacy; organizational ability, socio-economic causes or even the assertion that this was a particularly harsh transitional century for the Islamic world, which has generated the interest of just the wrong audience. However, I would like to stress that in order to counteract its appeal, scholars need to take another hard look at the fundamentalist message, and see where are they coming from. In the War against Terror, one of the mightiest weapons being used is not of a technological aetiology, but the simpler, but no less effective method, of fundamentalist discourse. This is designed to ignite the fires of passion in the target lay audience, using predominantly emotive narrative to put the message across. A decline in the interest of Muslim scholarship has meant that the fundamentalist can pretty much get away with what he wants to say, by mixing rhetoric with divine sanction. A comprehensive strategy should examine the role that enlightened and respected Muslim intellectuals can play in the fight against terrorism.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 6.

⁵⁵ Ibid.



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- *Articles*:: Shaun Gregory, "France and the War on Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.15, No.1 (Spring 2003), pp.124-147
- *Books*: Peter L. Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, (New York: Free Press, 2006)
- *Book chapters*: Mohammed M. Hafez, "From Marginalization to Massacres. A Political Process Explanation of GIA Violence in Algeria", Quintan Wiktorowicz, (ed.) *Islamic Activism. A Social Movement Theory Approach*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 37-60

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