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.

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, leaving 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.

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.
I. Our Position on Terrorism

Humanity lives today in an interdependent and interconnected world where peaceful and fair interaction, including intrafaith 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 conclusion that indiscriminate violence is not an acceptable form of religious extremism and the use of violence against innocent lives. There is no justification in Islam for terrorism or extremism.” 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 acts, 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 to enable them to live in safety and freedom. [4] 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, as is generally believed by a large percentage of Muslims. 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 administering “good” justice to the strug[227-78; 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). Contrary to the popular notion, “jihad” is not at all mentioned in the Qur’an as a hated act, but it is associated with acts of peaceful self-defense in the face of either 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 peaceful means have been exhausted. Neither the Qur’an, nor any of its derivatives, refers to the use of military force against others, 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 dealing with a war situation, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and 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, and as a general deterrent of Muslim behavior, the Qur’an is specific in its teachings about the respect due to 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 through war or other forms of terror [2:256; 3:84; 16:125; 29:48].

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 to terrorists by jihad. Such stereotyping and the use of terms such as “Islamic terrorists” are as unfair as referring to Timothy McVeigh as a “Christian terrorist”, or claiming that abortion clinics are centers of “abortion terrorism”. In Christian history, as in Islamic history, military violence has been justified by religious convictions. 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 as “infidels”, and does not advocate violence against them.

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iii. Muslims are to act as responsible citizens.

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(Qur’an 49:13)