

Islam: Religion of Peace or Violence?

By Sharmeen Akbani Gangat



Pakistani American commentator Sharmeen Gangat explores how terrorists' vision of Islam is so vastly at odds with the Muslim tradition that nurtured her.

Judge Miriam Goldman Cedarbaum asked Faisal Shahzad, the would-be Times Square car bomber, to reconsider “whether the Quran wants you to kill lots of people,” to which he said, “Quran gives us the right to defend. And that’s all I’m doing.”

No, Quran doesn’t sanction violence. Even with my limited knowledge of scripture, I know that Quran says that relations between all nations and states, whether Muslim or not, should be peaceful (verse 49:13); that maximum effort must be made to advance the cause of peace (10:25); that all means, including mediation and arbitration, must be undertaken to achieve peace (8:61); and that freedom of religion must be granted to every one (2:256).



But, Faisal Shahzad and other Muslims implicated in terrorist acts don’t seem to know this. Their grasp of the scripture is deficient. Hence, they have chosen Islam to become what sufferers of terrorism in the name of Islam have tagged it to be: violent.

Just a day after Faisal Shahzad was sentenced to life imprisonment, coincidentally, the Intelligence Squared U.S. organized a debate on Islam as a religion of peace. One of the two women on the panel, Zeba Khan, arguing in favor of the motion, referred to her upbringing: how her parents raised her Muslim; yet, enrolled her and her siblings in a Hebrew day school for nine years so that they could also learn about other faiths besides their own. Her reference point, throughout the debate, was a Gallup study showing that 93 percent of Muslims are peaceful and only seven percent of Muslims are radicalized. Their radicalism, according to the study, is motivated by politics, not religion.

The second woman debater, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, on the other hand, declared in no uncertain terms that no monotheistic religion is a religion of peace. I was reminded of an NPR interview earlier this year with religion historian Philip Jenkins, who said, “The Islamic scriptures in the Quran were actually far less bloody and less violent than those in the Bible.”

If all monotheistic religions are inherently violent, why does Islam invite global attention as the religion of violence? It is because the perpetrators of violence find justification for their cause in Islam. What, however, leads to such fractured understanding on their part?

The linguistic reach of its scripture and the absence of a single representative authority on Islam lead to misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the religion.

Arabic, the language of the Quran, is spoken in fewer than half of nearly 50 countries that are Muslim-majority—including Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the most heavily populated Muslim-majority countries.

In these non-Arabic speaking countries, Quran is learnt by rote with no attention to comprehension. Even if there is an impetus to understand the meaning of the Quran, there is heavy reliance on translations, which, in itself, is a risky proposition.

In countries, such as Pakistan, where the teaching of Arabic is advocated at the national level, the language is not taught as "a living language." Rather, it is for "textual memorization and recitation only," according to Alyssa Ayres in Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly's book, *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*.

What, therefore, happens is that the followers of the religion fall prey to the manipulators of the faith—who are free to select out-of-context verses to influence and recruit.

For instance, reference is often made to verse 4:74, which states that those who fight in the cause of God will be rewarded. But, there is no mention of the following verse, 4:75, which categorically clarifies that Muslims are only allowed to fight those oppressors who directly attack them, especially those oppressing the most vulnerable among them: old men, women, and children.

Add to that the problem of Islam's decentralized structure, which keeps Muslims from approaching a unified source for guidance. As Rabia Harris, the founder and coordinator of the Muslim Peace Fellowship, explained to me in an interview for an earlier story, "Pretty much anyone can grab the bullhorn and call himself an imam or Muslims' representative." While their views may not be Islam's, their voice is construed as representative—both by non-Muslims and Muslims.

In a bid to support personal opinion rather than the fundamentals of faith, imams may use Khutbahs (sermons) to manipulate the way the community processes and responds to social, political, and economic realities around them. In the words of M. Zuhdi Jasser, chairman of American Islamic Forum for Democracy, "Many imams wear multiple conflicting hats in the political, educational, and spiritual areas of our society, which they try to centralize in the mosque."

I remember listening to Khutbahs, during my growing up years, from our local mosque in Karachi, Pakistan, which emphasized the rewards of martyrdom and referred to Quranic verses—such as 9:5, which condones Muslims fighting non-Muslims. Luckily, I had parents who guided me to believing that such verses are directed at those non-Muslims who are aggressors; it is not directed at them for being outside of the faith.

But, not all are as fortunate to have families willing to question religious preaching. Their version of Islam may sound more like that of Faisal Shahzad, facilitating the impression that Islam is a violent religion.

Shahzad neither comprehends the nuances of the religion he was born into nor does he internalize the loyalty to the country he swore allegiance to. Or, he would have known Quran's stance on bond with humanity, "All human beings are a single nation" (2:213); and breach of oath, "And be true to your bond with God whenever you bind yourselves by a pledge, and do not break your oaths after having freely confirmed them and having called upon God to be witness to your good faith: behold, God knows all that you do" (16:91).

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