

“ITISHAD: KILLING IN THE NAME OF GOD”

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Megan Wickenheiser has written a very well researched analysis on the use of religion as a justification for acts of violence. Megan, a senior Criminal Justice major, has always been an outstanding, motivated student and has always been willing to question the status quo. This research is a perfect integration of her outstanding work ethic and her ability to tackle important issues. Her analysis does a very good job of explaining how extremism is justified on both a personal and societal level. Her primary point, that ALL societies use this justification process is poignant and controversial.

INTRODUCTION: "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." - Wayne Dyer. Typically when Westerners view suicide bombing, we view it as barbaric and inhumane, we quickly denounce their behaviors and condemn their actions. But what if we were to place ourselves in their shoes? What if we lived in a culture of violence and radical political movements coupled with poverty and degradation? Would we still view these acts as inhumane or would we see them as a necessary means to an end? This is an argument of 'clash of cultures' that leads to intolerance on both sides. We refuse to accept or even consider the other's viewpoint. This paper, urges the reader to try and remove oneself from the Westernized thinking we so readily relate to and attempt to critically think about this from a sociological standpoint.

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"Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror. The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing, have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness and a quiet, unyielding anger."-President George W. Bush

September 11, 2001 was a day that will never be forgotten. The attacks against America were horrific. 19 members of an Islamic radical movement boarded four airliners and sentenced every person on each of those flights to death.

These four planes completed suicide missions of terrorist organizations in an effort to send the message of destruction at America's core. These unbelievable acts begged the question, why would these individuals carry out such acts? The answer is simple, God.

Al Qaeda, like many other Islamic Radical groups and terrorist groups including Hezbollah ('party of God'), Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Black September, Fatah, and Palestine Liberation Front (PLF), just to name a few operate at both national and global levels. These groups are deeply rooted in the Islamic faith, which follows the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca, the 'founder' of Islam almost 1,400 years ago (Werner, 2001). Muhammad experienced religious visions where he would receive 'messages' from Allah (Werner, 2001). He spread his visions and experiences through word of mouth to his people, which eventually developed the Qur'an a compilation of his visions which has become the doctrine of Muslims. Scriptures are an essential part of the Islamic faith, along with the five pillars of Islam which include the Shahada (the daily confession of faith), the Salat (ritual prayer), the Zakat (paying an alms tax), Sawm (fasting during the month of Ramadan), and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) (Elmarsy, 2008). The word "Islam" literally means "submission to the will of Allah" (Werner, 2001). This faith is rooted in ideologies of peaceful submissions to Allah (God), however, in the Qur'an, Muhammad mentions the struggle or 'jihad' that Muslims

face (Robinson, 2003). In Hadith, one of the chapters in the Qur'an it states, "The best jihad [struggle] is by the one who strives against his own self for Allah, The Mighty and Majestic" (Robinson, 2003). In Arabic, this term "*jihad*" has multiple meanings, two of which are "*to struggle*" and "*holy war*" (Robinson, 2003). This concept of jihad is the spark extremist groups utilized to kill in the name of Allah. These groups take literal meanings from the Qur'an to incite the jihad they have carefully constructed. Fatah, Black September, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, PLF, and many others believe their extremist groups are 'submissive to the will of Allah', by executing suicide missions and killing thousands of innocent lives globally. So, if this religion is based on ideologies peace and submission to Allah, why is there killing in his name?

Post-September 11, 2001, known terrorists from extremist groups like Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas were captured and incarcerated in Middle Eastern Prisons (Post, 2002). 20 prisoners of the US participated in psychological interviews regarding terrorism and extremist groups, their beliefs, recruitment, history, and socialization (Post, 2002). The interviewer inquired regarding suicide missions, and any moral implications from the Qur'an. One inmate spoke of the issue, and said that radical groups take offense to the terms 'suicide' saying that suicide is a selfish cowardly act (Post 2002). The inmate then explicated that extremist groups engage in '*itishad*' or martyrdom (self-sacrifice for Allah) (Post,

2002). Itshad is the highest level of jihad and the greatest level of honor. The bombers are holy fighters who represent the Islamic faith and its beliefs, and execute these missions allows the individuals to seek the highest level of martyrdom gaining the greatest levels of respect and honor, according to an inmate (Post, 2002).

Islamic leaders avidly speak out against such beliefs saying “Islam condemns such abhorrent behavior and the Holy Qur’an equates the murder of one innocent person with the murder of the whole humanity” (Brown, 2002). Islamic leaders went on to say, “Islam does not teach revenge. It does not encourage the killing or oppression of non-Muslims” (Brown, 2002).

Groups like Hezbollah are infamous for practices in ‘martyrdom’ (“Fight Club”, 2008). Hezbollah, like other terrorist groups, have strict rules for membership. The members are required to profess religious loyalty (including daily religious observances), dietary restrictions and regulations, and material sacrifices (“Fight Club”, 2008). This membership and loyalty isn’t without its ‘perks’, Hezbollah provides services to its people including health care, education, security benefits, hospitals, and other social services (“Fight Club”, 2008). The ideology behind offering these services is, of course, to retain members, and a key way is through educating their impressionable children in the beliefs of the group. Large membership levels and confidence enables Hezbollah and other groups to

attack targets utilizing ‘martyr’ bombers (“Fight Club”, 2008). The average fatality rate for Hezbollah is 5.0 per attack, a substantially higher rate of success when compared to groups who do not provide for their members (“Fight Club”, 2008).

It is important to note the difference between terrorist groups and extremist groups. Extremist groups like Al-Qaeda recruit young men around 17-22 years of age, they are uneducated, unmarried, and have no planned future, these groups entice these individuals to join and offer the honor and respect that will reflect upon their parents and family if they decide to participate in itishad—killing in the name of Allah—and these individuals join the extremist groups sometimes hours before their death ridden missions (Brown, 2002). Terrorist groups, like the group that executed the horrific events of September 11, 2001 were adults in their mid-thirties. These were individuals with master’s degrees who lived in comfortable middle-class suburban homes and appeared to be assimilating to American culture as Muslims (Brown, 2002). The difference between these groups lies in their internal beliefs and submission of self along with unwavering faith in their superior’s plans for destruction. They also quote the Qur’an for rationalization and justifications for their actions. Terrorist groups carefully and strategically plan attacks, select certain days to deliver messages, and create mass casualty incident. They cling to Allah for some sort of justification for their ‘moral’ actions just like

radical extremist groups; however, the difference lies in timing. Terrorist groups take years to develop and evolve plans whereas extremist groups are more random and direct anger driven when carrying out attacks (Brown, 2002).

Extremist groups like Fatah and Hamas share many similarities in structure, but within the Palestinian society, the ideologies are splintered. Fatah's ideologies center on the armed struggle culture of everyday life (Zelkovitz, 2008).

Palestinians agree on many issues that plague their violence ridden country. A public opinion survey conducted in 1999 found that 87.6% of Fatah's members and supporters believed that their religion of Islam should have a dominant role in the future of Palestinian society. Many also noted that the Palestinian laws should mimic Islamic laws (Zelkovitz, 2008). Fatah remained a dominant political movement with political leader, Yasir Arafat, until 2000 when terrorist attacks broke out against Fatah members over a long standing dispute regarding the land in the Gaza strip (Zelkovitz, 2008). Fatah reformed their militarized unit named Al-Asqa Martyr's Brigade to continue to claim the land, fight for independence, and religious values however, in 2006 Hamas took over the Gaza strip (Zelkovitz, 2008).

Palestinian's express Muslim supremacy, and eight years after this controversy, Fatah has re-surfaced with new Islamist platforms that contain educational topics and culture surrounding self-martyrdom, including suicide

bombing which was utilized as war tactics in the name of Islam (Zelkovitz, 2008). These strategically intentional new platforms of Fatah came after fierce competition between groups like Hamas. Fatah movement utilized religious imagery combined with icons to incite support for self-martyrs, and took black and white checkered headscarfs combined with the colors of the traditional Islamic jihad flags to symbolize their movement (Zelkovitz, 2008). Fatah constructed satellite groups of their Islamic beliefs, and Hamas offered more competition also by expansion. Arafat, the leader of Fatah spoke out in favor of fighting for individuals who are being persecuted and offered that ‘Allah would support them’ (Zelkovitz, 2008). Arafat further addressed the issue quoting the Qur’an and enticing members to fight for Allah by assuring afterlife (Zelkovitz, 2008). Fatah is speculated to have clung to Islam because of their militarism and provided religious reason against technologically advanced nations. In a truly Durkheim ideology, Fatah also held beliefs that Islam glued the splintered groups together again. These acts can be considered mind manipulations that lead to corruption. However, Fatah has constructed their actions into images of pure devotion to jihad (Zelkovitz, 2008). Members of Fatah and Hamas have intermittent periods of accord. More recently, Hamas and Fatah have identified Islam as symbols of national identity which invokes closer ties between the two radical groups. These groups also heavily support an ecclesiastic state of Palestine to Islam (Zelkovitz,

2008). The factions still speak out against one another in forms of assemblies of public prayer protesting actions of Hamas or Fatah (Zelkovitz, 2008).

So why attack the Western world? Many terrorist organizations believe the United States is an arrogant nation full of ignorance to the world. Radical groups take the words of the Qur'an to an extreme and believe that a jihad against the adversary (infidels) is necessary (Brown, 2002). Extremists believe that against military power, a billion Muslims could overpower their strength and dominate (Brown, 2002). On September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush delivered a speech speaking of the attacks that had ensued earlier in the day; he spoke "Our enemies have made the mistake that America's enemies always make. They saw liberty and thought they saw weakness. And now, they see defeat" (George W. Bush, public presentation, September 11, 2001).

Shortly after the attacks on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush launched the 'war on terror' which further sparked the animosity to which the extremist groups expressed towards the US. President Bush attempted to alleviate the animosity by speaking at a press conference approximately one month post-9/11 regarding the assumption that we were waging a 'holy war or jihad' against the Islam religion, when in fact it was against terrorist groups:

“We've got to do a better job of explaining to the people in the Middle East, for example, that we don't fight a war against Islam or Muslims. We don't hold any religion accountable. We're fighting evil. And these murderers have hijacked a great religion in order to justify their evil deeds. And we cannot let it stand”. --George W. Bush.

This statement insinuates American's ignorance in cultural matters, it is understandable to say we aren't fighting a religion, but in a sense we are. It's a modern day crusade for faith in radical Muslim minds; these radical groups have aspirations to convert the world to Islam, not to mention that jihad is present in not only the culture of the Middle East but also in Islam itself.

Al-Qaeda is a notorious terrorist group, quite possibly the most infamous terrorist group of today. Al-Qaeda most known for the bombing of the USS Cole, a naval ship, in 2000 off the coast of Yemen and speculated for the September 11, 2001 plane hi-jacking, World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks to which the masterminds, Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri claimed to devise the plan for the attacks, this rumor has since been disproved (Center of Defense Information, 2008). In 2003-2004 alone Al-Qaeda launched 68 attacks (averaging 4.5 monthly) in Iraq to which the attacks primarily directed towards American presence in the nation (Brym, 2008). Following 2004-2006, Al Qaeda has been linked to 376 suicide bombers in Iraq, specifically during the elections of Iraqi

leaders in 2005. During these 20 months, the average amount of attacks per month spiked to 19 (Brym, 2008). Al Qaeda justifies their actions against the Western world as being a ‘threat’ to the Islamic faith. Bin Laden has known connections to an extremist group--Sunni’s which are located primarily in the Iraq region (Center for Defense Information, 2008).

Osama Bin Laden has a deepened past with Anti-American sentiments that stems back to his early extremist Islamic beliefs. Bin Laden hails from a wealthy upper class family in Saudi Arabia (Brym, 2008). His father expressed extreme anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiments but the entire family including Osama Bin Laden were noted for their intensive devotion to religion (Brym, 2008). Bin Laden began his radical political movements only after his xenophobia hit close to home—American forces began mingling in affairs of the Middle Eastern region for various reasons, and Bin Laden did not approve of the actions to which the American Army had partaken in (Brym, 2008). In 1982, the American military backed Israel by invading Lebanon while targeting the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The attack occurred in Beirut, principally West Beirut, where the majority of the violence took place. Bin Laden later recalls the amount of violence and death he witnessed—limbs torn, blood everywhere, innocent people slaughtered everywhere (Brym, 2008). He specifically remembered the distinct erect towers in Lebanon destructed and grounded, and said “As I looked at those

destroyed towers in Lebanon, it occurred to me to punish the oppressor in kind by destroying towers in America” (Bin Laden, 2005). Bin Laden saw these acts as pure political violence directed toward Muslims and toward the Islamic faith (Brym, 2008). He utilized his family’s inheritance to back Al-Qaeda to allow it to flourish and expand into satellite camps to encourage more membership, build terrorist training camps in nations across the Middle East to enable the execution of more missions (Center for Defense Information, 2008). His ideologies behind acts of terror were to protect and defend the Islamic world. Bin Laden also justified these terroristic actions against the western world and innocent victims of the Middle East utilizing religion as his crutch.

The problem with this ideology derives itself from the Middle Eastern countries where religious beliefs in government are one on in the same, an ecclesiastic state. In a 2002 and 2006 Pew Research Center conducted a survey based on public opinions regarding militant Islamic Fundamentalism support in seven countries: Indonesia, Morocco, Pakistan, Turkey, Nigeria, Lebanon, and Jordan, researchers found 1 in 4 Arab Muslims and 1 in 5 non-Arab Muslims articulated sympathetic feelings towards the victims of violence for reasons of Islam defense (Brym, 2008). The researchers also discovered strong predictors in individuals that would likely support self-martyrdom (suicide bombings/violence against civilians) for Islam (Brym, 2008). These factors include: perceptions that

the religion of Islam is threatened especially by the Western world in countries like the US, and that Islam does and should play significant roles in politics and produce an ecclesiastic nation (Brym, 2008). These factors can contribute to a dangerous thought process, considering radical groups rationalize killing innocent victims because of potentially faulty perceptions that their religion, Islam, being threatened. Radical groups utilize this thought process to justify their actions by killing in the name of Allah—killing for afterlife—killing for ultimate honor.

This ideology of killing in the name of God isn't a new concept. Religion has been a major factor in many wars since the existence of humanity, whether it be a war over polytheism or monotheism, Eastern Catholicism or Roman Catholicism, Protestantism or Catholicism, Judaism or Islam. This struggle divulges underlying factors such as squabbling over land, ownership of resources and ultimately power. Itishad, or killing in the name of Allah (God) is a practice with laid foundations in the Bible, Qur'an, and the Torah. Biblical stories illustrate rebellions against the controlling power to carry out God's will. Martyrs are used to demonstrate ultimate sacrifice to faith and are looked upon as heroes; this isn't unique to Islam--Christianity, Ana-Baptists, Protestants and many other religions look to martyr's as heroes of faith. These heroes of faith are utilized as tools to encourage a strong faith base in the religion. When an individual is 'martyred' called 'shuhada' for Islam, it is said they will go directly to paradise, all sins will

be forgiven, are purified, and they will receive the highest ranks in heaven. In addition, the martyrs sit at the right hand Allah in the “house of martyrs” (“Martyrdom in Jihad”). Other widely controversial ‘rewards’ included the 72 virgins and martyrs will have protected paradise for their families. Many scholars have renounced both of these claims on regard that there is nothing written in the Qur’an or in Hadith. It is thought to be used as a tactic to entice individuals to join the ‘martyrdom mission’ (“Islam and the Concept of Martyrdom”, 2004).

In many ways killing in the name of Allah or God mimics the ideologies behind nationalism and country pride. Defending our freedom and fighting for our nation requires the utmost respect and submission of self to the state. Their occupation is to protect our nation. The life the individual once lived is now controlled by a greater power, the military. Their families live on secured bases designed to be a basic small community complete with doctors’ offices, schools, gyms, grocery stores and even bowling alleys. The children are taught the ‘Pledge of Allegiance’ and ‘God Bless America’ and national pride and to love the ‘land of the free and the home of the brave’. American soldiers go to war in foreign nations, we impress upon them the honor and glory to which they receive for defending our nation. We offer great support for their acts of service and sacrifice of life. Dying in the battle fields in the midst combat for the US, bombing locations of camps of the adversary, or bombing an entire city like Hiroshima where millions

of innocent individuals perished yields great honor that is expressed with medals of service and stripes on the uniform. The soldiers dying for our country are awarded military burial and monuments are erected in their honor.

Comparatively, in extremist groups like Fatah, Hezbollah, and Al-Qaeda their pride comes from religious faith. Their jobs are to recruit new members and spread their faith while actively practicing Islamic beliefs. The individuals who are members of these extremist groups are controlled by those who are higher up, their ringleaders and masterminds of their plans. The members bring their families to live in the camps. Children are educated by the very people who plan attacks against the Western world. The beliefs of radical Islam and that of the camp are taught from early childhood so that hatred flourishes as the child grows. The men go off to their missions leaving their families behind knowing they will never return. The members are told they will receive great honor for their deeds by Allah and be granted an afterlife. These individuals go and execute their missions, killing innocent people with every target. The ‘martyrs’ make front page headlines around the world for their acts. Their idea of glory and honor must come from these headlines of destruction and human mutilation.

When cultures are compared, US offers a ‘war on terror’ and the extremist groups offer a ‘holy war’, which war is justifiable? Both cultures look to a greater power, whether it be government or God. So, is fighting for your country like

fighting for God? Americans look at this question and blatantly reject this thought process. Radical Muslims look at this with a completely different perspective—their government includes God. It is a clash of cultures, we see it as inhumane and a godless act, we believe in killing for our country, they believe in killing for Allah. We have special operation groups, they have terrorist groups. We have war heroes--they have 'martyrs'.

The extremist groups prey on young impressionable and uneducated men to carry out an 'honorable' act by mass murdering innocent civilians in the name of religion. These individuals are duped into essentially killing themselves in the name of Allah. They cling to their faith because they are surrounded by poverty, war, death, and suppression by the wealthy. They diligently follow their leaders to believe in the cause, the purpose, the suicide bombing. When religion is removed from the puzzle, what is left? Groups of individuals are divided by radical beliefs, divided over land, control, and power. Realistically, if religion was removed, the Middle East would be left with struggle over land and control of their respective populations. So, is religion really is the opiate of the people? Would the world have terrorists if radical Islam didn't exist? If Marx is indeed correct that religion is illusory, then why are the radical Islamists killing innocent civilians? If radical Islam was removed, the extremist groups would be forced to find happiness within their culture, but could they? The Middle East is an area surrounded by constant

conflict. Poverty, hunger, war, violence, struggles over land and politics—perhaps these groups have developed as a smoke screen to avoid the actual problems these individuals are facing and religion provides an easy answer to the injustice and suffering. So fighting for the faith is in a sense fighting the issues that face them. Killing in the name of Allah would in essence be killing the problems or the people who cause the issues, and therefore could be viewed as martyrs. So the question remains is killing in the name of Allah, for afterlife, for honor and for martyrdom truly worth life sacrifice? If not for God or Allah, is killing for our country, for honor, and national pride worth life sacrifice?

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