

117724 - Definition of terrorism and what it means in Islam and in the West

the question

We have heard a great deal about terrorism. What is terrorism according to the Muslim view? What is terrorism according to the Western view? How can we debate with them if we differ with them concerning the definition?

Detailed answer

Firstly:

Terrorism (Arabic irhaab) is a term that refers to scaring others. In and of itself it is neither good nor bad, unless the one who uses this word intends it to mean something and unless we see the consequences of the actions based on it. Whoever says that terrorism (irhaab) in Islam is synonymous with killing is mistaken, because the linguistic meaning of the word does not reflect that. Terrorism refers to scaring, not killing per se. In terms of Arabic usage, words derived from the same root as irhaab (terrorism) appear in the Qur'an where our Lord, may He be exalted, instructs us to fear Him, as in the verse (interpretation of the meaning): "and fear [only] Me [wa iyyaaya farhaboon]" [al-Baqarah 2:40]. He has also commanded us to prepare to face the enemy from whom we expect plots against us and plans to wage war against us. This preparation is intended to scare (or terrify) the enemy so that we will not become easy prey for him. This is stated clearly in the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

"And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows"

[al-Anfaal 8:60].

The unjust colonialist states use this word in conjunction with Islam, intending thereby to distort its image in the sight of all people. Hence they set up conferences and held seminars, and established research institutes in the name of fighting terrorism, but in all of these efforts there was no discussion at all about these criminal colonialist states who are oppressing the weak Muslims, such as the Hindus and their terrorising of Muslims in Kashmir, or the Russians and their terrorising of Muslims in Chechnya, or the Americans and their terrorising of Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Zionists and their terrorising of Muslims in Palestine. Some naïve Muslims have started to use this word to describe anyone they want to fight, and put people off him. They may be right in describing a particular group of Muslims as terrorists, but what about the states that use terrorism, and what about criminal racist organisations that have been spared from having this word used against them, which has become used exclusively in reference to Muslims?!

The rulings and teachings of Islam were prescribed by Allah for the purpose of protecting the honour, life and wealth of the Muslim. For that purpose Islam forbids killing, theft, zina (unlawful sex), and slander, and has ordained severe punishments for anyone who commits those crimes. The punishment may go as far as execution – as in the case of the previously-married zaani (adulterer) – so as to protect people's honour.

There is a severe punishment for one who terrorises and frightens people, such as gangs of bandits on the highways and those who do similar deeds within the city. They are the ones who strive to spread mischief and corruption on earth. Allah has prescribed the severest punishments for them, so as to ward off their evil and protect people's wealth, lives and honour. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Indeed, the penalty for those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive upon earth [to cause] corruption is none but that they be killed or crucified or that their hands and feet be cut off from opposite sides or that they be exiled from the land. That is for them a disgrace in this world; and for them in the Hereafter is a great punishment”

[al-Maa'idah 5:33].

In fact, Islam went even further, as it forbids the Muslim to scare his brother, even in jest. It was narrated from as-Saa'ib ibn Yazeed that he heard the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) say: "No one of you should take his brother's property in jest or in earnest, and whoever has taken his brother's staff, let him return it." Narrated by at-Tirmidhi (2160) and Abu Dawood (5003); classed as hasan by al-Albaani in Saheeh at-Tirmidhi.

It was narrated that 'Abd ar-Rahmaan ibn Abi Layla said: The companions of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) told us that they were travelling with the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) on a journey. One of the men fell asleep, and some of them went and took some arrows that he had with him, and when the man woke up he panicked, and the people laughed. He said: What made you laugh? They said: Nothing, but we took this man's arrows and he panicked. The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "It is not permissible for a Muslim to scare or alarm another Muslim." Narrated by Ahmad (23064) and Abu Daawood (4351). Classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Abi Daawood.

Secondly:

"Terrorism" (irhaab) in Islam is of two types:

1. That which is praiseworthy

This refers to scaring an enemy lest he attack the Muslims and occupy their land. That involves being fully prepared, arming themselves with faith, being united, and equipping themselves with weapons. The verse from Soorat al-Anfaal quoted above explains that it is obligatory for the Muslims to do this.

Islam is not alone in this regard. Rather all nations compete in manufacturing arms and equipping themselves with weapons of mass destruction, establishing huge armies, and holding military parades to show off their troops and weapons. All of that is a show of strength intended to scare their neighbours and enemies, lest they think of attacking them.

1. That which is blameworthy

This refers to scaring those who do not deserve to be scared, Muslims or others whose lives are protected by Islamic law, such as those who have a covenant with the Muslims, those to whom the Muslims have granted protection and safety, and non-Muslims living under Muslim rule (ahl adh-dhimmah)

The Islamic Fiqh Council has defined terrorism as: acts of aggression and enmity carried out by individuals, groups or states by way of transgressing against people (affecting their religious commitment, physical and mental well-being, wealth or honour). That includes all ways of scaring, harming and threatening people, or killing them unlawfully, and all actions that are connected to those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger, scaring wayfarers and travellers, acts of banditry, and all violent acts or threats that take place in support of criminal objectives, whether they are done by individuals or groups, with the aim of instilling fear and terror in people, scaring them by harming them, or exposing their lives, freedom, sense of security and well-being to danger. Another type of terrorism is damaging the environment, facilities, public or private property, or exposing some national or natural resources to danger. All of these are ways of spreading mischief and corruption on earth, which Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, has forbidden the Muslims to do in the verse in which He says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters”

[al-Qasas 28:77].

Sixteenth session, Makkah al-Mukarramah, 21-26/10/1422 AH — 5-10/1/2002 CE

In this statement, they pointed out two important issues:

The first issue is refuting the argument of those who describe Islam as being a religion of terrorism. Among other things, this statement said:

The members of the Council have noted that media campaigns are well orchestrated, and based on lies and nonsense, as they are organised by the types of media that are irrational

and hostile, which are directed by the Zionist media organisations to stir up resentment, hatred and discrimination against Islam and Muslims, and to make false accusations against the final religion of Allah, foremost among which is the accusation of terrorism.

It became clear to the members of the Council that accusing Islam of terrorism through media campaigns is but an attempt to put people off Islam, as people are showing interest in it and are entering the religion of Allah in crowds.

The members of the Council call upon the Muslim World League and other Muslim organisations, and indeed all Muslims, to defend Islam, whilst paying attention to choosing the best methods that are appropriate to the honour that may be attained by undertaking this mission in the context of refuting the lies against Islam, and the accusation of terrorism. It may be noted that terrorism is a global phenomenon that cannot be attributed to a particular religion or people. Rather it is a phenomenon that stems from extremism of which no modern society is free. They explained that there are different types of extremism, such as political extremism, ideological extremism or religious extremism. Extremism that results from exaggeration about some issues of religion is not limited to the followers of a particular religion. Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, mentioned the People of the Book exaggerating about their religion, and He forbade them to do that, as He says in His holy Book (interpretation of the meaning):

“Say, O People of the Scripture, do not exceed limits in your religion beyond the truth and do not follow the inclinations of a people who had gone astray before and misled many and have strayed from the soundness of the way.””

[al-Maa'idah 5:77].

The second issue that the council discussed is terrorism carried out at the level of the state. This is a matter concerning which the global media is silent, and has not exposed the people behind it. Among other things, the council said in a statement:

The Council affirms that there is another type of terrorism, which is terrorism carried out at the level of the state. One of its clearest and most abhorrent forms is the terrorism that is

perpetrated by the Zionists in Palestine, and what the Serbs did in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Kosova. The Council regards this type of terrorism as posing the gravest danger to security and peace in the world, and regards confronting it as coming under the heading of self-defence and jihad in Allah's cause.

End quote.

Thirdly:

With regard to terrorism perpetrated by the West, it is what we read of and witness of their invasion of weaker states and the plundering of their resources, and what we see of torture, rape and killing, all of which is documented via audio and video media, in documents that cannot be denied. This is a continuation of their historical practice of occupation by means of force, violence and weapons.

What is really strange is that Western states – especially America – have not given a definition of terrorism until now! It is clear that they would implicate themselves by any definition they chose. Therefore they have given this word a vague meaning, to be applied to whoever they decide to accuse of terrorism.

Shaykh Saalih al-Fawzaan (may Allah preserve him) said:

From ancient times, the disbelievers have waged war against Islam, describing it in the worst of terms, in order to put people off it. "They want to extinguish the light of Allah with their mouths, but Allah refuses except to perfect His light, although the disbelievers dislike it." [at-Tawbah 9:32]. That includes their description of Islam as terrorism and savagery. They forget that terrorism, savagery, genocide, transgression against people unlawfully, and all other blameworthy attitudes in fact belong to the way of the disbelievers and are part of the disbelievers' character.

The fact that some so-called Muslims have behaved wrongly – either out of ignorance or bad intentions – cannot be attributed to Islam, for Islam forbids such deeds.

The way to protect Islam from this accusation is to explain that the actions of these individuals has nothing to do with Islam; rather these are cases of individuals acting badly, and every Muslim is prone to error; no one is infallible except the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

Al-Muntaqa min Fataawa al-Fawzaan (1/416, question no. 247)

And Allah knows best.