



**In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate,
the Dispenser of Grace**

'Id al-Adha Khutbah

Mitigating the Toxic Political Theology of ISIS

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الله أكبر، الله أكبر، الله أكبر، الله أكبر

ولله الحمد

***God is Greater than; God is Greater than; God is Greater than
All Praise, Thanks & Gratitude belongs to God Alone***

Introduction

We express our thanks and gratitude to Allah, the Lord of Wisdom, for having guided us to celebrate *'Id al-Adha* today in unison and solidarity with the pilgrims (*hujjaj*). Yesterday, these blessed *hujjaj* returned from their ceremonial halting and pausing on the sacred plains of *'Arafat* in compliance with the most important symbolic rite pertaining to the pilgrimage (*hajj*). For the Prophet Muhammad (may Allah's everlasting peace and blessings be upon him) has declared in an authentic tradition (*hadith*) which can be found in the *hadith* collection of Imam Ahmad:

الْحَجُّ عَرَفَةٌ

“The pilgrimage (hajj) is 'Arafah”¹

At the very heart of the symbolism of the *hajj* and the pausing at the sacred plains of *'Arafat* is the equality in which Islam holds all humankind. This we contend should also be at the heart of the social message of *'Id al-Adha*. In his famous farewell sermon at *'Arafat* on his pilgrimage, just before his death, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) summed up the essence of the message of the *hajj* when he proclaimed:

“All human beings are descendent from the prototype Adam, and Adam has been created from the earth. There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab. Neither is there superiority for a white person over a black person, nor for a black person over a white person,

¹ Reported from ‘Abdurahman bin Ya’mur and recorded in the *Musnad* of Imam Ahmad.

² Sahih Muslim, Kitab-al-Hajj, #159. Also in Sahih Bukhari

except through God-consciousness. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one with the most righteous conduct (taqwa).”²

We pray and make *du`a* that Allah, the Most Compassionate, grants all of those who were blessed with being present at `Arafat yesterday an accepted (*hajj mabrur*), forgives them their sins (*dhanb maghfur*), and allows them to return to their homelands as true ambassadors of Islam.

By celebrating *'Id-al-Adha* in solidarity and in unison with the *hujjaj* we are giving this great day of happiness and joy its true meaning and significance. For *'Id al-Adha* is a celebration of the conclusion of the fifth pillar of Islam, the *hajj*, in the same way that *'Id al-Fitr* is a celebration of the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, the fourth pillar of Islam.

We believe that in contemporary times when it is possible to view the entire *hajj* via satellite television it is incumbent upon Muslims all over the world to synchronize their *'Id al-Adha* celebrations with the *hujjaj* in Makkah. For, *hajj* is an expression of global Muslim unity and this can only be achieved if the Muslim *ummah* is united in observing *'Id al-Adha* with the *hujjaj*.

Reflecting on the State of the Muslim *Ummah*

At this time when over two million *hujjaj* from virtually all nations and every Islamic theological orientation, are performing the same pilgrimage rites (*manasik al-hajj*) in

² Sahih Muslim, Kitab-al-Hajj, #159. Also in Sahih Bukhari

unison and amity it is ironic and paradoxical that the Muslim *ummah* is currently witnessing an unprecedented level of extremism and sectarianism within its ranks that is causing untold suffering and mayhem. In Syria and Iraq in particular geopolitical events have dehumanized large sectors of those societies and have created an environment that violates all civilized and religious norms, especially the principle Islamic norms of preserving human life (Q6:151; Q17:33; Q25:68), honouring human dignity (Q17:7) and affirming freedom of belief (Q2:256; Q10:99; Q11:118).

It is estimated that close to 200,000 people have been killed in the three-year-old civil war that has been raging in Syria alone. In addition, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 6.5 million Syrians or one in three Syrians have fled the country.³ To put that into perspective, it would mean that the equivalent of the entire population of the Western Cape has either been killed or has now fled Syria.

Particularly, since the middle of 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or the Levant (ISIS/ISIL), currently calling itself the “Islamic State” (*al-dawla al-Islamiyya*)⁴, have targeted Christians and Yazidi minorities in Iraq for extermination because of their religious beliefs. However, it is Muslims who do not subscribe to the austere and harsh interpretation of the Islam of ISIS who have been and continue to be the major

³ See: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

⁴ As indicated earlier, I am aware that ISIS or ISIL has now morphed into the “Islamic State.” For purposes of this *khutbah*, however, I shall use their erstwhile moniker since it is a more familiar label.

victims of their brutality and barbarism. Never before in our recent history has the commitment of the global Muslim *ummah* to a more peaceful, humane and just world order been challenged as it has been in recent times.

In light of this distressing situation it would be uncaring and incongruous for us to celebrate *Id al-Adha*, a celebration of the conclusion of the *hajj*, a unifying and global symbol of Muslim unity and amity, while ignoring and being oblivious to the deep anguish the global Muslim *ummah* is experiencing at this moment in history.

It behooves us therefore in this *‘Id al-Adha Khutbah* to reflect on the state of the *ummah* and in particular the current crisis of extremism and sectarianism in the Middle East and elsewhere. While I fully acknowledge that there are multiple factors that have contributed in varying degrees to the current crisis, including the United States of America’s illegitimate invasion of Iraq in 2003 as well as the decades of political tyranny and authoritarianism by governments in the Middle East, in this *khutbah* I would like to focus on the political theology that underpins and fuels the current wave of Muslim extremism that we witnessing.⁵ I will also suggest possible ways in which we can mitigate the spread of what I describe as the toxic political theology of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

⁵ For an analysis of the role of US and its War on Terror in the rise of ISIS I recommend the book by veteran journalist Patrick Cockburn, *The Jihadis Return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising* (UK: OR Press, 2014).

Defining Political Theology, Religious Extremism and Sectarianism

It might be expedient to begin by defining what we mean by our three critical terms, political theology, religious extremism and sectarianism. Noting that all definitions are contested I offer the following for the purposes of this *khutbah*.⁶

Political theology refers to the relationship between religion, politics and state power. Primarily it is about how politics is part of a salvation project (*najāt*). The relationship of politics to salvation has been a puzzle for Muslim thinkers and theologians over the centuries. But it has become a greater challenge with the rise of the secular state where religion is viewed as part of the private realm.

Theological orientations include theocrats who believe that religion should impose itself upon the state as well as those who believe that religion should play a robust role in the public arena in promoting social justice issues. On the other end of the spectrum, we have those who believe that religion should remain in the private domain and who actively seek to avoid politics at all costs.

⁶ For a more precise and academic definition of Political Theology See: Ebrahim Moosa, “Muslim Political Theology Defamation, Apostasy and Anathema.” *International Symposium-Cartoons & Minarets Reflections on Muslim-Western Encounters*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2012

Religious extremists advocate an exclusivist theology in which only their own group can attain salvation. They furthermore attach an exaggerated importance to theological differences, which invariably degenerates into discrimination, bigotry, and sometimes even violence against people of other faiths. While some religious extremists eschew politics, there are many who are proponents of the view that religion should dominate the state.

The hallmark of sectarianists is that they believe that their own salvation requires that they aggressively purge their own community from those they perceive to hold heretical beliefs.⁷ It is my considered view that religious sectarianism is both a symptom and cause of an extremist mindset or worldview. In other words, extremism breeds and feeds on sectarianism. At the same time, if religious sectarianism is left to flourish, the conditions become ripe for extremist views and actions to take hold.

The language of Muslim sectarianists is filled with condemnatory terms such as, *kafir* (infidel), *mushrik* (idolator) and *mubtadi'* (heretic) among others. It is this language that has the potential to incite extremist hatred and violent intolerance towards those who do not share their beliefs and interpretations.

⁷ For a more detailed exposition of sectarianism see Omar, A. Rashied: "Muslim Sectarianism in South Africa: Symptom or Cause", in *Muslim Views 10 January 2014*; <http://muslimviews.co.za/blog/2014/01/19/muslim-sectarianism-south-africa-symptom-cause/>

Five Key Elements of the Political Theology of ISIS⁸

Employing the above working definitions of political theology, religious extremism and sectarianism I would like to identify five key elements that constitute the political theology of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

1. Tawhid

The first component I want to identify is the central pillar on which ISIS's ideology is structured, the quintessential core doctrine of Islam, namely the concept of *tawhid*.⁹ All Muslims agree that the power and allure of Islam lies in its strict Monotheism - the belief in the Oneness of God. How that manifests onto the rest of creation and humanity in particular is where the rigidity and intransigent beginnings of the ISIS political theology starts to align.

For ISIS, *tawhid* is a concept that shuns diversity and requires uniformity, similitude and acquiescence. They demand that *all*

⁸ These key elements of ISIS's dogma are gleaned from a reading of primary materials that ISIS has published. The most important of these materials are those with which ISIS announced and declared their *Khilafa* – titled: *Hadha Wa'da Allah* (This is the Promise of God) on 29 June 2014. ISIS subsequently on 5 July 2014, released a YouTube video of a *Ramadan khutbah* delivered by their *khalipha*, Dr. Abubakr al-Baghdadi. To consult these documents and more, SEE: <http://jihadology.net/category/islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham/>

⁹ ISIS's concept of *tawhid*, though not entirely identical to, is inspired by *Kitab al-Tawhid*, the treatise of the eighteenth century Islamic reformer, Muhammad ibn `Abdul Wahhab (d.1792). For an appreciation of his history and dogmatics, See: *Wahhabi Islam See: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*. Natana J. DeLong-Bas (London: I.B. Taurus, 2007).

human beings follow Islam and that all Muslims must conform to their interpretation of Islam with little latitude for free choice and disagreement. Their literal and dogmatic adherence to the critical Islamic concept of *tawhid* incites them to actively seek to homogenize the world and the Muslim ummah and to eliminate pluralism and diversity. Their strict and austere interpretation of *tawhid* also permits them to label anything that they do not agree with as *kufir* (unbelief) or *bid'a* (evil innovations). As a consequence they have a proclivity for *takfir*, meaning to excommunicate from the fold of Islam anyone who espouses a different theological position from themselves.

2. *Al-Wala' wal- Bara'*

The second element of ISIS's political theology advocates a severe version of a well-known *salafi* doctrine known as *al-wala' wal-bara'*, the doctrine of loyalty and disassociation. A number of contemporary Muslim scholars, including Dr. Khalid Abou El-Fadl, Shaykh Abdul Hakim Murad as well as local scholar, Shaykh Siraj Hendricks of the Azawiya, have singled out this doctrine as the source of the growing tendency towards intolerance and sectarianism within the Muslim *ummah*. According to Shaykh Siraj Hendricks, “[T]his is a doctrine that defines both its proponents and the “other” in rigidly exclusivist terms and – in an archaic Calvinist sense – as reprobates.” He incriminates this doctrine as the source of the “violent” othering” of both non-Muslims as well as Muslims who offer alternative interpretations of Islam. He furthermore, argues that this is a doctrine that has found virulent support in the so-called *salafi cum wahhabi* movement

and has become dominant especially during the past 200 years.¹⁰ It is in essence a theological principle which translates into the infamous phrase “*you are either with us or against us*”.

3. *Jihad al-Talab*

The third component of ISIS’s political theology embraces a truncated and legalistic interpretation of *jihad*.¹¹ This understanding of *jihad* is partial towards a *fiqhi*-jurisprudential interpretation while neglecting the ethico/moral dimensions of *jihad*. For ISIS, *jihad* is synonymous with *qital* – both meaning warfare. Furthermore, *jihad* is understood not merely as defensive warfare (*jihad al-daf’i*) but also as a preemptive means of establishing the rule of Islam technically known as *jihad al-talab*.

The so-called *casus bellum* of ISIS’s *jihad* is not merely the aggression of the enemy but also the unbelief of the enemy, which includes Muslims who do not subscribe to their puritanical interpretation of Islam. Consonant with this mindset they elevate their beliefs and dogma above the sanctity and sacredness of human life. Consequently they are unrestrained in the ethics of warfare – they pay scant attention to the traditional Islamic categories of non-combatants (*ghayr muqatila*) as well as prohibited methods of warfare and killing.

¹⁰ Shaykh Siraj Hendricks, “The Challenges of Extremism,” in *Extremism: Dissecting a Phenomenon: The First IPSA Annual Spring Symposium*, Sunday 18 October 2009, page 10.

¹¹ See the “Open Letter to Baghdadi” published by over 120 Muslim scholars and leaders for a more extensive exposition of *jihad* as understood by ISIS <http://lettertobaghdadi.com/index.php>.

Their literal and ahistorical understanding of Islamic texts allows them to interpret notions of *jihad* without any restrictions.

4. *Khilafah*

The fourth element of ISIS's political theology is that ISIS has skillfully tapped into the prevalent yet contentious Muslim yearning for the re-establishment of a Muslim Caliphate which became extinct after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1924.¹² Curiously, the title of the announcement by ISIS of a caliphate alludes to the opening words of Qur'an 24:55, *Hadha Wa'd Allah*, meaning: "*This is the Promise of God.*"

The citation of this Qur'anic verse implies that ISIS believes that the establishment of *their* caliphate, is confirmed by Allah in the Glorious Qur'an. Furthermore, Qur'an 24:55 employs the word '*istikhlaf*' meaning succession, which ISIS evidently interpolates as referring to the necessity and legitimacy of *their* caliphate. Moreover, since ISIS regards themselves and their in-group as the only true example of Islam in practice, they have declared their caliphate unilaterally and without any concern for consulting (*shura*) Muslims globally.

¹² Two prominent positions on this have been proclaimed in response to ISIS specifically. The previously cited "Open Letter to Baghdadi" which in point 22 opens by saying "There is agreement (*ittifaq*) among scholars that a caliphate is an obligation upon the Ummah". This is disputed by the well-known Shaykh Abdullah Bin Bayyah's "Response Fatwas to ISIS" accessible here: <http://binbayyah.net/english/2014/09/24/fatwa-response-to-isis/>.

5. *Yawm al-Qiyamah*

The fifth component of the political theology of ISIS is that it draws on the symbol of the black flag. This symbolism can be found in some prophetic traditions (*ahadith*). In one such prophetic tradition in the *hadith* collection of Ibn Majah, for example, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is claimed to have said the following: “*If you see the Black Banners coming from Khurasan go to them immediately, even if you must crawl over ice, because indeed amongst them is the Caliph, Al Mahdi...and no one can stop that army until it reaches Jerusalem.*”¹³ In other words, ISIS’s symbolic use of a black flag represents an apocalyptic worldview in which the end times are imminent.

Furthermore, the declaration by ISIS of a caliphate is viewed as the beginning of a series of battles that will bring spectacular victories and herald the coming of the Mahdi, the prophesised redeemer of Islam. It is believed that the Mahdi will rule before the Day of Judgment and rid the world of evil. Hence, ISIS proclaims that it is the religious duty of Muslims to migrate from their lands (*hijra*) and join the fight to help usher in the final victory for Islam. Many of the young men who travelled to Syria and Iraq appear to have been swayed by this “doomsday narrative”; namely that the conflict in Syria and Iraq is a prelude to the fulfilment of this prophecy of the End of Time (*Yawm al-Qiyamah*).

¹³ This hadith can be found in the collections of Ibn Majah, Al-Hakim, and the Musnad of Imam Ahmad.

Mitigating the Toxic Political Theology of ISIS

The five elements that I have identified above do not constitute the only ones advanced and utilized within the creed that ISIS has developed. But I regard these five elements as the key dimensions of what I would like to describe as the toxic political theology of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It has and continues to provide the religious legitimation for the brutal murder of scores of innocent human beings and the violent destruction of heritage sites and historical treasures in Syria and Iraq. Even more disconcerting is the fact that some of the elements of this toxic political theology is spreading in many parts of the world including in our own local community.

In the last two years for example, we, in South Africa have witnessed orchestrated campaigns to declare Shi'as as out of the fold of Islam (*takfir*). This raises a legitimate fear that such an orchestrated campaign of hate and intolerance could escalate into direct physical violence as it already has in other parts of the world. It is thus critical that we develop ways of responding to this lethal theology and to mitigate its destructive potential.

At the outset Muslims must acknowledge, no matter how distressing it is, that we *do* have extremists (*muttarrifun*) within our ranks and that they *do* employ Islamic texts and symbols in legitimating deadly conflicts. We therefore need to strongly reject far-fetched conspiracy theories, such as the belief that the ISIS leader, Abubakr al-Baghdadi is a Mossad created agent. Even if this dubious and implausible suggestion is true – the underlying theological arguments that are

attracting followers and driving the destructive machinery of ISIS are drawn from Islamic sources – not ideas created by Mossad. The focal point of our discussions should be on why so many young Muslims are attracted to this harsh and unforgiving understanding of Islam.

I would like to propose four strategies that should form an integral part of a cogent response that mitigates the toxic political theology of ISIS.

1. Freedom of Belief in Islam

First and foremost we need to respond to ISIS's perverted interpretations of the central Islamic principle of *tawhid* by reaffirming an understanding Islam that teaches that the more we embrace diversity in God's creation the closer we are to acknowledging the unity of God. It is essentially this creative paradox that escape Muslim extremists.

In contradistinction to the extremist perspective, the most primary source of Islamic guidance, the Qur'an, regards differences in religious beliefs, perspectives and viewpoints, as being natural and an essential part of the human condition: "*Let there be no compulsion in religion*"(Q2:256).

A denial of the right of others to hold beliefs and views that are different and incompatible to one's own is tantamount to a denial of God himself: "*If your Lord had so desired, all people on the earth would surely have come to believe, Do you then think you can compel people into believing?*" (Q10:99).

All of these aforementioned Qur'anic verses establish the principle of freedom of belief and thought in Islam. The challenge, which Muslim extremists present for mainstream Muslims, is to amplify the Qur'anic teachings on religious pluralism and work hard to make it an integral part of the fabric of contemporary Muslim culture.

2. Safeguarding the Sanctity of Life in Islam

Second, we need to respond to ISIS's brutal beheadings and other acts of barbarism, by reminding ourselves, and others, that we are compelled by our faith in, and commitment to Islam to protect, defend and preserve the sanctity of all human life. The safeguarding of human life is one of the supreme objectives of Islam (*maqasid al-shari'ah*). The Glorious Qur'an is replete with references concerning the sacredness of human life (Q6:151; Q17:33; Q25:68). The most striking of these Qur'anic proclamations that underscores the supreme sacredness of human life is verse 32 of *surah al-Ma'idah*, chapter 5, in which God, the Giver and Taker of Life (*al-Muhyi al-Mumit*), equates the unjust and wanton killing of one human being to that of the killing of all humankind:

***If anyone kills a single human being without just cause
it shall be as though he had killed all of humankind;
Whereas if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he
had saved the lives of all humankind (Q5:32).***

It should be crystal clear, therefore, that a conscientious Muslim is someone who is constantly moved by faith to sanctify, revere, and respect human life.

Therefore, as conscientious Muslims and responsible citizens we cannot remain silent in the face of wanton loss of human life in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. Muslims must not become weary of stating again and again loudly and unequivocally, that acts of extremist violence and barbarism are contrary to the teachings of Islam. The sanctity of human life is a supreme value in Islam and nothing is worth the cost of a human life. ISIS's heinous acts of murder and violence are dishonourable and betray any expression of faith in Islam. In Islamic ethics, the end does not justify the means.

3. Islamic Education of Youth

Third, we need to address the attraction that ISIS's simplistic and exclusivist ideology has especially for young Muslims. Amongst the key contributing factors that make this ideology attractive are a lack of Islamic literacy, cultural alienation and global Islamophobia. The lack of Islamic literacy means that Muslim youth lack the ability to understand complex issues and so simplistic theological and jurisprudential solutions become attractive.

In his book, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion & Culture Parts Ways* (2010) Oliver Roy points out that the modern disconnection between faith communities and sociocultural identities produces culturally alienated youth. Their search for identity renders these young people susceptible to extremist viewpoints of Islam. Demagogues who peddle a puritanical and culture free version of Islam are extremely adept at recruiting such vulnerable young Muslims.

The challenge for mainstream Muslims is to counter their rhetoric by promoting a deeper Islamic literacy that opens up spaces for engagement with complex theological debates as well as contemporary socio-cultural issues.

Addressing Islamic literacy and cultural alienation of youth is complicated by the fact that current US foreign policy and in particular its global war on terrorism is engendering a belligerent environment that serves as a breeding ground for hatred and radicalism and the rise of extremist movements such as ISIS. This is further exacerbated by a growing phenomenon of Islamophobia, that is, an antipathy towards Islam that results in exclusion, discrimination, misrepresentation and stereotyping of Muslims. Hence we also have to acknowledge that very often it is not only religious extremism but also political grievances that attract some of the youth to extremist groups like ISIS.

It is against such a volatile context that we need to have more programs that reach out to young people in our community not to emasculate their energies but to channel them into constructive programs for social integration. We need to inoculate our youth, to immunize them through education against extremism and sectarianism.

The best way of doing so is by empowering them with a life-affirming and more open understanding of Islam. In this understanding of Islam, righteousness (*birr*) is measured not just by how much you pray, or how often you fast or how you dress or what you eat, but most importantly, by how you interact with and live alongside your fellow humans beings (Q2:177).

It is the latter attributes of righteous conduct in Islam that we must use to attract our youth to Islam – these include showing mercy and compassion to the less-fortunate in society, being fair and just in our home and work environments, being truthful and forgiving in our personal relationships and being humble and respectful in our interactions with other faith communities, and challenging global injustices through citizens movements.

4. Non-Sectarianism and the Amman Message (Risalatul `Amman).

Last but not least, I want to advocate that all Muslims take responsibility for disseminating and imbibing the historic Amman Message (*Risalatul `Amman*).¹⁴ The Amman Message provides a framework for mitigating the threat of Muslim sectarianism. In July of 2005, a historic gathering of the foremost Muslim scholars in the world took place in Amman, Jordan. This unprecedented gathering of some of the foremost contemporary Muslim scholars issued a three point declaration. First, it recognized eight legal schools of thought as legitimate *madhahib* in Islam. These included all four Sunni legal schools as well as the *Shi`i Ja`fari*, *Shi`i Zaydi* and *Ibadi* schools. Second, it forbade Muslims from excommunicating adherents of any of these eight recognized Muslim legal schools. And third, it outlined the preconditions for the issuing of religious edicts (*fatwas*), so as to prevent the circulation of illegitimate edicts (*fatwas*).

¹⁴ The full Amman Message and those who endorsed it can be found online at: www.ammanmessage.com.

The Amman Message in particular calls for immunizing our communities against extremism and sectarianism through education. It encourages institutions, organizations and individuals to educate Sunnis and Shi`as about the actual history and evolution of Sunni-Shi`a relations. It is noteworthy that Shaykh Ebrahim Gabriels undersigned and endorsed the Amman Message on behalf of the South African `Ulama.

I urge each one of you if you who have not done so already to consult this document and study its contents. I am convinced that the vast majority of ordinary Muslims are not supportive of the current trend of extremism and sectarianism that ISIS epitomises.

On this great day of *'Id al-Adha*, while we are celebrating the conclusion of the *hajj*, a symbol of global Muslim unity and amity, we also lament the shameful state of the Muslim *ummah*. At this sacred time I call on you to join me in earnest prayer for the healing of the *ummah*.

Supplication:

O Allah thou art Peace

And Peace Comes from Thee

Allow us to live in Peace

You are the Sustainer of the Weak and the Oppressed

To You we lament of our weakness, our failure

And our shame before the people of the world

O Most Merciful of those who show Mercy

The people of Syria and Iraq are in urgent need of Your mercy

So pour down upon them Your mercies

O Allah Comfort the hearts of the suffering people of the world

O One who is All-Powerful and Irresistible in Might

Guide all of us to fashion a more just and caring world.