[1]Is Islam a religion that encourages violence?

What is Jihad?

The Arabic word *jihad* means "struggle" or "exertion" and refers to any spiritual, moral or physical struggle. Upon returning from a battle, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, *"We are returning from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad—jihad against the self."* For Muslims, *jihad* means struggle in the cause of God, which can take many forms. In the personal sphere, efforts such as obtaining an education, trying to quit smoking, or controlling one's temper are forms of *jihad*.

Jihad as a military action is justified in two cases: struggle to defend oneself, or others, from aggression and struggle for freedom of religion and justice. The *Qur'an* says *"Tumult and oppression are worse than killing"* (2:217), and therefore must be thwarted. Human beings as responsible agents of God on earth are compelled to exert themselves to protect the oppressed and strive to create righteous societies.

Systematic, forced conversion to Islam is a historical myth. Muslims defeated hostile forces (Byzantines and Persians for example) and gained control of new lands where Islamic rule was established, yet non-Muslim inhabitants were not forced to become Muslims. Islam clearly condemns such actions: *"There is no compulsion in religion"* (*Qur'an*, 2:256). For various reasons, and in the course of time, many non-Muslims did find the message of Islam appealing, however, and converted to Islam, resulting ultimately in the transformation of society at all levels.

Because *jihad* is a highly nuanced concept, and because the term stems from an Arabic root meaning "struggle," the term "holy war" is an inappropriate rendering or definition.

Does Islam promote violence and terrorism?

Contrary to popular misconception, Islam does not condone terrorism. Prophet Muhammad and the Rightly-guided *Khalifahs* (caliphs) prohibited the killing of civilians and non-combatants in the course of warfare. The *Qur'an* says, *"Fight for the sake of God those that fight against you, but do not attack them first. God does not love the aggressors"* (2:190). Moreover, the *Qur'an* indicates that taking one life unjustly is like taking the life of all humanity, providing a strong moral deterrent to indiscriminate bloodshed. Besides prohibiting the killing of non-combatants, the *Qur'an* and the Prophet also prohibited the torturing of prisoners and the senseless destruction of crops, animals and property.

Struggle against injustice and oppression is a key, distinctive concept in Islam. Through the ages, the concept of righteous struggle has inspired Muslim peoples and movements to stand up against wrong and oppression, as in the case of the wars of independence against colonialism. African-Americans, in recent decades, have been drawn to Islam, in part, because of its activist stance.

While some Muslim extremists may perpetrate acts of terrorism, this does not diminish the legitimacy of righteous struggle against oppression and injustice experienced by Muslims in many parts of the world (often at the hands of so-called Muslim leaders). Indeed, such persons actually violate the teachings of Islam.

> *"O you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let hatred of anyone lead you into the sin of deviating from justice. Be just: this is the closest to being God-conscious. And remain conscious of God: verily, God is aware of all that you do."* (Qur'an, 5:8).

In any case, there can be no such thing as "Islamic terrorism," despite the fact that such terms have become a popular oxymoron. The adjective "Islamic" cannot be applied to what some misguided Muslims do. See the section on *Teaching with Sensitivity* for more on inappropriate usage of various terms.

What is "Islamic Fundamentalism"?

Historically, the term "fundamentalist" was originally applied to those Christians who took the Bible as literal scripture, as opposed to allegorical truth, among other implications. Muslims, on the other hand, have always considered the *Qur'an* to be the literal Speech of God. Moreover, there are no degrees of belief regarding the basic doctrines of faith.

Nowadays, the term "fundamentalist" is used to describe any adherent of the major world religions who holds that faith is a model for modern life and plays a role in political, economic or social matters. Furthermore, in terms of Islam, it is often applied to those Muslims, better termed "extremists" who use unjustified means to achieve particular political goals. A further problem is that the term is often wantonly and pejoratively used in the media to describe Muslims who base their views and actions on a particularly religious worldview. In such cases, sincere, practicing Muslims who perform the daily worship, avoid alcohol, or wear *hijab* are labelled inappropriately,even though their behavior may be normative.

Thus, "Islamic Fundamentalism" is a confusing misnomer, resulting in broad generalizations and misunderstanding.

What is Islam's view on human rights and social justice?

According to Islam, human beings are the noblest creations of God, endowed with consciousness and freedom of choice. The *Qur'an* states that God has made human beings His trustees or stewards on the earth. Muslims see this world as God's field, and human beings as the farmers and caretakers. Muslims believe humanity's ultimate task is to build a world that reflects the will of God. Thus, Islam is balanced in its concern for salvation in the Hereafter as well as peace and justice in the present world. Islam places great emphasis on social justice for all people. Muslims consider it an obligation to oppose all who exploit, oppress, discriminate, and deal unjustly with people.

> *"O you who believe, be upholders of justice, witnesses for God even if it be against yourselves."* (Qur'an, 4: 135)

Muslims understand the goal of Islam to be the spiritual upliftment of the individual and productive development of society. The ultimate consequence of rejecting God and His guidance is a selfish, pleasure-seeking, corrupt, and unjust society. Conversely, the natural consequence of obedience to God's laws and living according to His guidance is a society of peace, equality, freedom from want, dignity for all, and justice.

As-salaam Alaykum — "Peace Be Unto You"
The Muslim Greeting, in Diwani Calligraphic Style