

論文

Islam and the Nature of Endless Violence in the Middle East

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Why is war and violence not over in the Middle East? Until one crisis and violence ends, another one will appear in a new form in another part. In almost all of these conflicts, one or both sides invoke the teachings of Islam, or claim that the bloodshed is for the sake of Islam or at the order of Islam. The main issue of the article is what the nature of violence in the Middle East is, why is it endless, and what is the role of Islam in them? The findings of the article reveals that war and violence in the Middle East is a multidimensional and multi-rooted phenomenon. The various forms and causes of violence in this region are related to today's world, but the roots and bottom layers of its occurrence and continuation are cultural and historical, which is strongly intertwined with the religion of Islam. In other words, the religion of Islam has been understood, re-read and reproduced under the influence of the harsh history and culture of these societies. As a result, a divine religion that should be a harbinger of ethics, morality, love, peace and coexistence has become a tool for violence by some extremist groups. The issue is discussed in three main sections. In the first part, the nature of violence in the Middle East is clarified. In the second part, for understanding the role of Islam in the violence, the verses of war and Jihad in the Holy Quran are analyzed. In the third section, the historical roots of violence in Islamic culture and societies are discussed.

Keywords: Islam, Quran, Jihad, Violence, Middle East, Extremism,

Introduction

The Middle East has been plagued by endless violence for decades. Most of the violence are carried out under the banner of Islam and documented in the Holy Qur'an. Organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS emerged in the name of

Islam and committed many acts of violence by referring to Islam and Quranic verses. For years, there has been war and massacre of innocent people in Yemen in the name of Islam, and recently the Taliban have seized power in Afghanistan and is resorting to all forms of violence, claiming to enforce Sharia law. In the Middle East, groups fighting against each other to implement Islam and kill each other while each claim to carry out God's command. Some governments also imprison, torture and kill people, calling it according to the order of Islam. On the other hand, the opposition and some scholars believe that all this has made Islam as a means to achieve their political and economic goals and interests.

Among the most fundamental concerns are that Islam as a divine religion which must be a preacher of peace, ethics and compassion, how prescribes violence and war for its adherents. In the same vein, questions arise what are the verses of war and Jihad in the Holy Quran that are cited by extremist groups. An important point about the nature and roots of violence in the Middle East, which is also the main idea of this article, is that violence in the Middle East today is a multidimensional and complex phenomenon.

So the main question of this article is; what the nature of violence in the Middle East is and what is the role of Islam in its continuation? To answer this question, the article is organized into three main sections. In the first part, we explain the nature of violence in the Middle East, which is either directly referenced by Islamic teachings, or indirectly influenced by Islamic culture, or the religion of Islam is used as a tool for violence and to incite people. In the second part, to understand the role of Islam in the violence, we analyze the verses of war and Jihad in the Holy Quran to find out to what extent the verses of the Quran play a role in prescribing and perpetuating violence in the Middle East. Of course, the religion of Islam is beyond the Quran, but the Quran as a main source of Islam can shed some light on Islam in this short article. In the third section, we look at the historical roots of violence in Islamic culture to clarify another part of the causes of the continuing violence in the Middle East.

The hypothesis of the article is that Islam as a divine religion, rationally and logically cannot be a promoter of violence, instead, it should be a source of ethics, morality, and affection. Thus, the causes of violence in the Middle East is multidimensional including populist religious culture, violent history, political interests and sectarian disputes that all are tied to Islamic beliefs and some superstitions. The above hypothesis can be proved in different ways, and of course, it requires extensive and detailed discussions, which is not possible in the form of an article. However, in the second part, and only by explaining the verses of the Quran about war and Jihad, the above hypothesis has been partially confirmed. If the verses of the Quran do not confirm the acts of violence, the multiple roots of these acts of violence must be sought elsewhere, and that is the "Historicultural" and "Historicultureligious"⁽²⁾ roots of violence, which will be explained, in the third part.

The Nature of Violence in the Middle East

1. Direct religious motivations of violence

Violence and attacks in the name of Islam and with a religious nature have prompted many questions and disputes. (Kempel 2017; Frissen, et al. 2018, 491–503). Particularly there are some Muslim scholars who interpret Islam as violent and promote extremism (Ramazan 2019, 313–387; Bin Farhan Almaleki 2017, 92–230). Maybe can be seen some potential grounds for violence in some scholarly approaches to Islam like Quotation, Jurisprudential and Theological approaches. The question is when and where is this potential grounds of violence actualized into violence in practice? The answer

is that when violence is theoretically and religiously justified, or supported by the faith and beliefs of people, or when divine rewards and paradise are promised in return, violence can easily take place. Perhaps a young person who has studied Islamic subjects for a few years in a seminary and feels that its heart is replete with love for God, will decide to enter paradise and meet God and Prophet Muhammad, and will be willing to kill himself-herself and others to hasten the realization of this fervent wish (see: Abbās-zadeh Fathābadi 2009, 114–115; Sotoudeh and Khazāeī 2013, 17–18. Also: Abouhanifeh and Abouroman 2019, 29–116).

When such people feel society has deviated from Islam or right path—the way they interpret it—they may feel they are commanded by God to rectify the societal situation and remove all obstacles that lie between reality and the ideals they hold. In this case, they may feel that if they want to serve God's religion, they must kill people whom they consider them unbelievers or atheists, and seize their property (Abbās-zadeh Fathābadi 2009, 114–115). Some Quranic verses and hadiths can easily be found to support such a strategy and an ideological foundation can be established. However, it should be noted that such a foundation, which comprises the most significant ideological source of violence in the Middle East, is superficial, one-dimensional and passionate. These religious teachings can be harnessed to provoke violence through ordinary religious people. The religion of the common people is very powerful and efficacious in this regard.

2. Intra-religious sectarian violence

A part of the violence in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, is sectarian and inter-religious violence. This type of violence is also carried out directly with reference to Islam and with religious motives. The most important division of Muslims is between the two main branches of Shia and Sunni Islam. Sunnis are further divided into the four schools of Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Maliki, but there is no conflict with each other. Shias are divided into four main schools, the most prominent of which is the Twelver School (*Ithnā 'Ashariyah*), those who believe in 12 Imams. Shia Muslims can be considered idealists who have always tried to improve socio-political circumstances, promote justice and protect others' rights (Mehraḳī and Sājedī 2016, 121–137; Gorjipour, Chlonger and Abtahī 2015, 125 onwards; Motaharī 2009, 22–24). Shia Muslims, like the majority of Sunni Muslims, have not advocated for war or violence and do not resort to violent measures except to defend themselves against attacks and invasions (Tousī 1980, 289–299; Firahī 2008, 131–160; Sālehī Najafābādī 2003, 16; Motaharī 2010, 24–25, 63–64; Faghfour Maghrebi 2009, 27–56). However, radical Salafi Sunnis consider Shias to be infidels and polytheists, and that it is obligatory to kill them (Pākchī and Ansārī 1993, 723; Sayyed-Nejād 2010, 107–108; Roohī 2014, 11–12, 15). At the same time, some extreme Shias insult respected Sunni figures in their ceremonies and laments. In other words, while Sunni and Shia Muslims have co-existed peacefully for centuries, there are conflicts of belief between the Shia and Sunni branches that can easily lead by extremist Salafi groups to conflict and violence.

3. Political Cuses of Violence

Political factors can be regarded as the most significant cause of the eruption of violence in the Middle East (Āzād-pour 2007, 59–61; Amini and Hezbāvi 1997, 70; Sājedī 2016, 147–155; Barzegar 2007, 63,65; Abbās-zadeh Fathābadi 2009, 121–126; Gharākhani 2010, 165–166). These factors can be divided into internal and external, which play out at three levels: domestic, regional and international. Internal factors include the spontaneous formation of extremist groups

without the interference of government. External political factors include the situation in which domestic governments or foreign states, directly or indirectly, in a hidden or open manner, backing to the formation of violent extremist groups. At the domestic level, the people or government of a country is the target of violence by extremist groups from the same country. At the regional level, the people or government of one or multiple countries in the Middle East are targeted by multinational extremist groups with major regional aims. At the international level, extremist Muslim groups target non-Muslim people or countries. Violence perpetrated by non-Muslims against Muslims in the Middle East falls outside the scope of the current paper.

Most political-rooted violence in the Middle East, quickly takes on a religious dimension in order to better achieve its goals and take the benefit of populism and power of masses. It should also be emphasized that there is a multitude of powerful motivations, and some governments in the region—and the wider world—play a role in their organization and support (Dokmejian 1998, 21; Heidari 2015, 54–55; Barzegar 2007, 63, 65–66; see also Ahmadi 2005, 31–56). However, those committing violence on the front lines have dogmatic and ideological beliefs and motivations and are unaware of the undisclosed political agreements and aims of governments. Nevertheless, the players responsible for inciting and encouraging common people to commit violence, sometimes can easily discourage the masses from using violence temporarily, until such a time that it is once again in their interest to exploit the enormous power of the common people.

4. Sociocultural Grounds of violence

The sociocultural characteristics of Middle Eastern countries are intertwined with religion, and part of it is superstition, emotion, and sensation. Populism, superficiality, and shallowness are very strong in this culture. The popular culture of people in every society plays a major role in whether or not violence erupts and if so, how it is committed. Violence will erupt in countries whose popular culture already has the potential for violence (Barzegar 2007, 63–65; Heidari 2015, 49–60). Sociocultural factors affect the outbreak of practical violence in two ways: Firstly, extremist groups and people may be affiliated with particular social classes and emerge in particular societies, which may have the propensity for violence. (see: Yazdani and Nezhad-Zandiyah 2014, 143–170; Barzegar 2007, 63–67; Gharakhani 2010, 159–180; Sajedi 2016, 147–155). Other relevant issues include the degree of deprivation experienced by radical group members, what guidance and direction they have received and what social structures and institutions they have been in contact with.⁽³⁾ Secondly, the extent to which sociocultural conditions are susceptible to the emergence of violence, such as the order and security that exists in the country, and the proportion of the population in agreement with the goals of radical groups, can also influence the actualization of violence.

Figure below summarizes our discussion here, showing the status and importance of each of the factors that lead to the nature and implementation of violence. As demonstrated, the religious justification for violence is the main and most fundamental factor. This can lead directly to sectarian strife because of Shia-Sunni hostility, shown as the second factor here, or interact with political and sociocultural factors. Alternatively, religious justification for violence may interact directly with sociocultural or political factors, which are also effective in creating violence.

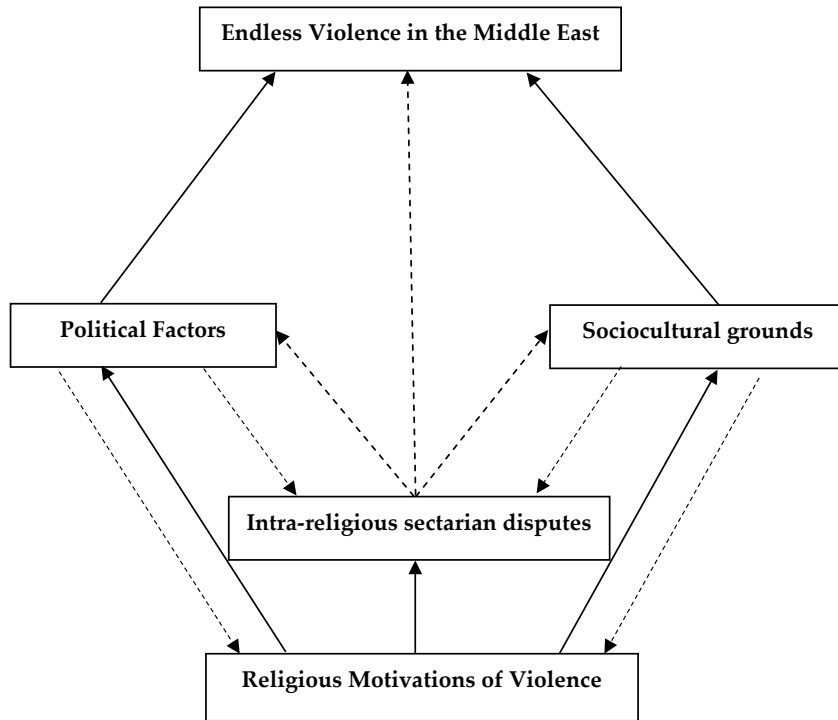


Figure 1. Interactions between the Factors Causing Violence in the Middle East

The Holy Quran and Prescribing Violence

Almost all extremist groups in the Middle East, including Jihadists, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban, cite the Qur’an, hadith, and the history of Islam to justify their acts of violence. An attempt is made to clarify to what extent the Quranic verses regarding war and Jihad or approve of war and violence (See: Esposito 2015, 1069–1070). In this article, we only discuss the verses of the Quran about war and Jihad to clarify whether these verses of the Quran actually allow Muslims to commit violence.

According to Islamic and Quranic knowledge, the verses of war and Jihad can be divided into three categories. The first group includes verses that outline conditions and restrictions, for the act of Jihad, consisting of the following:

Prohibition of starting a war and engaging in any violence, prohibiting Muslims from instigating conflict, prohibiting the use of cruel and unjust treatment while in battle, inclusive of any form of oppression during war, the necessity to adhere to a moral and modest code of ethical behavior, and the permission to take preventive actions which must not surpass the limits of retaliation. We will discuss these verses.

The second group contains verses that without equivocation encourage and advise Muslims to wage war and Jihad. Based on the rules of Quranic sciences, these verses that condone Jihad are contingent on the terms and conditions of the first group, the “conditional” and “restrictive” verses mentioned in the first group, and every term and condition applicable

to war and Jihad in the aforementioned verses would necessarily need to apply here (Soyuti 1984, 103). In other words, when engaged in Jihad and when it becomes necessary, certain conditions precluding Jihad apply. This means that there is no condition or acceptance for Jihad unless all principles of the first group are present or have been exhausted. The third group of verses includes those that explain a situation or clarify issues of war and Jihad and the rewards and bounty because of it.

In the following, we will analyze the three categories of the aforementioned verses and some examples of it in the case of war and Jihad.

1. Conditional Verses

In some verses of the Quran concerning Jihad, only those who have had forceful violence, oppression, and banishment imposed on them are permitted to wage a campaign or engagement. For example, Muslims who are blameless and without any fault of their own but find themselves expelled from their homes or those who are forced to renounce their faith and consequently are deprived of their fundamental tenets, have this authority. It is pointed out in the Quran that if people do not hold steady to their beliefs in God, and if they do not have the freedom to choose their own religion and beliefs, then all the monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques where God is worshiped, will eventually become obsolete (Quran, chapter *Al-Hajj* (22): 39–40). These verses are based on the right to defend one's natural right to worship in cases where physical violence and armed force is employed, giving Muslims the right to defend themselves. Muhammad Ammarah Egyptian thinker argues that war and Jihad have no religious basis in Islam. In other words, Jihad has not been among the means for the circulation and extension of Islam. Because nonbelievers had oppressed Muslims and exiled them from their own homeland, and because any form of offensive leading to one's return to his or her homeland would presuppose a form of resistance, he is convinced that these verses point to the political and national issues of that time (Ammarah, 2004, 32).

In addition, while the Muslim community may have encountered opposition holding a different faith, the latter, due to their religion and because of their religion, were not expelled from their homes and lands. According to the Quran, administering kindness and justice are by no means discouraged (Quran, chapter *Al-Mumtahana* (60): 8). The Quranic verse then continues: "God loves the people who promote justice". Based on the Quranic context, the last section of the verse is in fact a command to Muslims to show kindness in the first place, and then act justly with their enemies. In the following verse, the word "*al-ladhin*" refers to the enemies: "*those people who have not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes*", where the term "*people*" refers to influential enemies who were present in that period with the ability to have caused harm, but did not.⁽⁴⁾

Another verse orders Muslims to assemble whatever forces they can in order to instill fear into their enemy (Quran, chapter *Al-Anfal* (8): 60). The next verse commands Muslims to accept peace and reconciliation whenever the willingness to presents itself (Quran, chapter *Al-Anfal* (8): 61). The first verse emphasizes military preparation only to instill fear on enemies, and is intended as a deterrence to the use of force. The following verse serves as a reminder of the importance and priority for peace. The next verse states:

"If enemies want to deceive Muslims, and pretend to make peace and suddenly attack them, Muslims should trust in God because He will help and assist them because of the believers, in whom He has created love and affection" (Quran, chapter *Al-Anfal* (8): 62–64).

Therefore, Muslims should be prepared for war and Jihad (Quran, chapter *Al-Anfal* (8): 65). It is clear in these few verses that no kind of suggestion or recommendation to wage a battle has been offered; rather what is important is vigilance and defense in addition to the believers' readiness for battle if enemies should attempt to deceive Muslims by using surrender or peace (Nekoonam and Karimitabar 2013, 166–175).

In another verse of the Quran says: "*Fight in God's cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits: God does not love those who overstep the limits*" (Quran, chapter *Al-Baqara* (2): 190). Certain basic principles can be inferred from this verse. Firstly, fight only with those who start a battle against you; this implies a counter-attack or defense by Muslims against first strikes, and thus a battle by Muslims can only mean defense. In this verse launching a battle is prohibited and unlawful for Muslims. Secondly, the battle should only take place in the path of God and therefore fighting a battle for any other reason, including financial or commercial, political, national, ethnic, and or based on racial lines, or for establishing dominance, is prohibited. Thirdly, if your enemy launches a battle against you, you must fight and defend yourself in return but you must not go beyond the limits, or oppress the enemy in the battle. Some scholars believe that what is meant by not resorting to oppression is that one must always remain faithful to the moral principles, while observing what today is considered "humanitarian rights", for example; the prohibition of violations against prisoners, fugitives, the wounded, women and children, and the non-contamination of water and food supplies (Rashid Reza, 20, 666). Others also believe that what is meant by "not oppressing" is that you should not be the one to start a conflict (Ibn Al-Hassan ibn Tabarsi, 284). Fourthly, you must not be among oppressors under any circumstances. The sentence "*God does not like the oppressors*" categorically forbids any kind of oppression, just as it could imply something abstract such as prohibiting one from starting a battle, and thus leading to a form of oppression.

After setting out some terms and conditions, the above-mentioned verse immediately commands Muslims to kill their enemies wherever they find them and drive them out of where they have themselves been driven out, i.e., Mecca, because, "*Fitnah* (i.e. Harassment, torture, disorder, and chaos) *is worse than murder*". According the rules of Quranic knowledge, instruction here says Muslims should kill their enemies wherever they find them however only because they themselves are the victims of murder wherever they are found, based on the presumption that it is the enemies of Muslims who have initiated an attack. Thus, Muslims, in expelling out their enemies is a consequence of Muslims being driven out in the first place and thus a basic act of self-defense. The significance of this point in the verse is that the Quran does not give Muslims absolute authority to expel and exile people - rather, it commands Muslims to respond in kind. The reason for these actions is made clear in the same verse, and it is nothing other than the same type of "persecution" which the enemies resorted to which was worse than killing (Quran, chapter *Al-Baqara* (2): 191). What the Qur'an means by "persecution" are the actions of arrest, imprisonment, torture, expulsion from one's homeland, inciting wars, battles, and killing Muslims, which the non-believers of Mecca continuously performed against the Muslims during the Prophet Muhammad's mission? (Rashid Reza, 61; Hashemi Rafsanjani 1992, 476). The verse says that these acts of torture and oppression and murder which idolaters used to commit against Muslims, and thus depriving them of peace and security at different times and places, are called '*al-Fitnah*' or "persecution", which according to the Quran is worse than killing. Therefore, Muslims in the early years of Islam had no other alternative but to fight in order to end the *persecution* committed by idolaters. Moreover, the next verse says that if Muslim's enemies cease any persecution, torture, murder and oppression, Muslims must also respond in kind and end any fighting (Quran, chapter *Al-Baqara* (2): 192). However, if enemies do not cease fighting, Muslims should also fight until *persecution* ceases, meaning that the actions of arrest, imprisonment, torture and killing of Muslims should end completely and their enemies should

refrain from such actions (Quran, chapter *Al-Baqara* (2): 193). However, in an explicit form within the same verse Muslims likewise without delay must cease fighting when hostilities end_ because if Muslims do not do so, they will in turn become the oppressors (Quran, chapter *Al-Baqara* (2): 193). According to this verse, a battle is considered to be over when enemies have stopped actions of torture and killing of Muslims; Muslims also have to stop fighting, unless there are those who continue the acts of oppression and violation. It is clear that the word *al-Fitnah* does not signify that Muslims must fight until there is no persecution in the world. From the context of the previous verses it can be inferred that war is permitted only when the enemy begins an attack (Salehi Najafabadi 2003, 17). The verses which follow only permit equal retaliation and further emphasize that Muslims must not cross the limits in their acts of retaliation or commit any oppression. Rather, they must respond within the scope of equal force, to the extent that they have been oppressed (Quran, chapter *Al-Baqara* (2): 194; Ibn Al-Hassan Tabarsi, 287).⁽⁵⁾

Another verse of the Qurān states: *“treat the ones who oppress you in the same manner they have oppressed you.”* Some scholars believe that this verse is a permanent command and a fundamental principle, implying for Muslims to not commence any conflict. Some people who advocate Jihad, utilize the verse *“fight against the idolaters at any time”* (Quran, chapter *Al-Tawba* (9): 36) as abrogating the above-mentioned verse, however, this view has been rejected by the commentators of the Qurān since all the verses of the Qurān concerning war and *jihad* were revealed during the period when Muslims faced onslaughts by their enemies. Likewise, the verse *“fight against the idol-worshippers at any time”* was revealed when the idol-worshippers of that time nullified their pact by attacking Muslims. Thus, it is believed the battles of the prophet Muhammad were fought in defense_ and hence the verses explicitly prohibiting Muslims from commencing a battle must be applied (Rashid Reza, 215). Allameh Tabatabái points out that wherever ‘non-believers’ and ‘idolaters’ are mentioned in the Qurān, they are non-believers and idol-worshippers from the early years of the Prophet Muhammad’s mission in Mecca, and thus these terms are not applicable in other eras and periods, or with regard to Muslims (Tabatabái, 562).

In general, according to the aforementioned verses Muslims must observe three principles. First, Muslims are not allowed to commence a battle; second, they should fight a battle only when necessary and to the least possible extent; and third, they must adhere to the limits and only defend themselves to the extent of deterrence.

2. Unconditional Verses

The unconditional or absolute verses of the Quran concerning war and Jihad are the ones, which invite Muslims to Jihad without any special terms or conditions. Two important points can be mentioned here regarding these verses. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, based on the conditional and unconditional rules in Quranic science, the unconditional verses are subordinate to and dependent on the conditional verses and must be interpreted within the framework of terms and conditions which the conditional verses have already determined (Soyuti, 103). With a brief overview of the most important verses concerning war and Jihad in the Quran it is made clear that the Quran does not allow Muslims to start a war under any circumstances. These verses have only warranted Muslims the authority to defend themselves, and the battles fought by the Prophet Muhammad, were without exception, fought in defense.(see: Alikhānī, 2012, 174–220) Secondly, based the contexts of the verses and the occasion of their revelation, each one of these verses either explains certain commands or clarifies certain conditions or encourages believers to carry out certain actions already prescribed under special circumstances and with special terms and conditions. Thus Muslims are prohibited from starting a war,

and wars may only be fought in defensive terms, thus a call to arms for Muslims is made only when necessary.

3. Explicit Verses

The third group of verses is composed of the verses that analyze various aspects of Jihad or refer to various rewards and recompense for warriors and martyrs. These verses do not command Muslim to conduct Jihad, rather they shed light on various aspects of the concept of Jihad. In the previous verses, Muslims were encouraged to defend themselves when facing oppression by their enemies, however, fighting, especially voluntarily, and risk being killed in battle, cannot be considered a light matter and thus prompting some sort of motivation to embark on such an undertaking. Therefore, in return for volunteering, fighters receive rewards and recompense. Verse 216 of chapter *Al-Baqara* says that “Muslims are ordered to take part in wars, though they may dislike it; however, some people may dislike certain things, which turn out to be of benefit to them” (Quran, chapter *Al-Baqara* (2), 216). The verses before and after this verse explain issues such as how to utilize income and revenue for the sake of God and determines the recipients of it. They also identify the sacred months, the clauses regarding war and battle during these months, migration, and how to work and witness for the sake of God, in addition regulations and observances concerning gambling and alcohol. This verse seems to explain the nature and necessity of defense for any society and might not denote a specific instance (Quran, chapter *Al-Baqara* (2): 217). The verses here refer mostly to the social and political issues of Muslims at that time. Some verses of chapter *Al-Nisa* allude to the rewards and recompense for Jihad for the sake of God (Quran, chapter *Al-Nisa* (4), 74) and encourage Muslims to conduct Jihad against oppressors (Quran, chapter *Al-Nisa* (4), 75). The next verse only stresses that believers fight in the path of God and nonbelievers fight in the way of the allies of Satan (Quran, chapter *Al-Nisa* (4), 76), and the following verse points to the responses of certain people after a proclamation of Jihad along with their fear of taking part in Jihad (Quran, chapter *Al-Nisa* (4), 77).

At the end of this discussion, it can be said that the understanding and interoperation of the Quran by Muslim extremist groups in the Middle East is not based on the accepted principles of the Quranic and interpretive knowledge, and is more political, emotional and superficial. In this case, the main roots and causes of the violent culture in the Middle East must be sought elsewhere, which we will discuss in the next section.

The Historical⁽⁶⁾ Roots of Violence in the Middle East

Almost all scholarly and political approaches to Islam have historical and cultural roots. In the following, we will discuss the historical and cultural contexts of violence in Islamic culture—which are linked to the Middle East—as well as their ongoing effects. In my opinion, violent approaches and interpretations entered in the Islamic culture and societies from the culture of pre-Islamic ignorance and reproduced themselves repeatedly throughout the history. The next discussion will address this issue.

1. The culture of violence in the pre-Islamic period of ignorance

The popular culture of the Arabian Peninsula during the early years of the advent of Islam was a violent Bedouin cul-

ture. The Holy Quran describes the Arabs before Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) revelations as people who were generally violent, cruel, oppressive, discordant and lacking comprehension (Quran, chapters *Al-Hujurat* (49): 14; *Al-Tawbah* (9): 97,101), while of course highlighting that some of them were exceptions to this rule (Quran, chapter *Al-Tawbah* (9), 99–100). Ibn Khaldūn stipulates that the Arabs before Islam were barbarians, plunderers and thieves; they seldom took orders from their leaders, did not have much knowledge about crafts and other educational fields, and were not talented in any domain (Ibn Khaldun 1957, 285–286; Amin 1964, 41; Ali 1976). Ibn Khaldūn regards the Arabs as destructive in nature and asserts that they live and die by the sword (Ibn Khaldun 1957, 285–286; see also Sälem 2001, 307–335).

The Arab researcher Ahmad Amin (1964) takes the position that pre-Islamic Arabs were fierce and short-tempered people who were incited by insignificant and worthless things and therefore would overreact easily and draw their swords as soon as they got angry. It was the sword which was chosen to play the role of judge and arbitrator in such situations. The consequences of such battles between Arabs usually led to their own death and destruction. Thus, violence and warmongering was a well-established system in their society and had become one of their everyday chores (Ali 1976, 267; Ahmadi 2005, 43).

Abdul-Aziz Sälem, another specialist on Arab history, believes that the love for battle, which had been deeply rooted for centuries among pre-Islamic Arabs, eventually transformed into a desire to dominate and control using force, aggression, oppression, assault and violence. During the pre-Islamic period of ignorance, the only possible way for people to assert their rights, or achieve dominance or supremacy of any kind, was by means of battles, violence and oppression (Sälem 2001, 313). Abdul-Aziz Sälem cites various documents from the popular Arab culture of the time in support of his view (Sälem 2001, 263–264; Ibn Bahr Al-Jāhez 1989, 15; Ibn Abd Rabbah al Andolesi 1989, 86; Shokri Alousi, 2007, 147,148,157). The life of pre-Islamic Arabs was surrounded by never-ending war and battles occurring one after another; if blood was spilled, nothing could make up for it other than more bloodshed (Sälem 2001, 328).

Researchers believe that the pre-Islamic Arabs were continuously engaged in either killing or getting killed. They never grew tired of spilling blood or taking revenge. Therefore, one of their most important and unanimously accepted laws, which everyone – from adults to young children – accepted as a well-established fact and acted upon, was the concept of “revenge”, a concept they also considered sacred. When one side took revenge for an earlier killing, the people of the opposite tribe again took out their swords and vowed to take revenge for their slain relatives: innumerable people were killed in this circuitous process. Grudges were transferred from one generation to another in the form of legacies, and future generations would take revenge for their ancestors (Showqi 1985, 70). More than one thousand seven hundred battles were recorded in the history of Arabs until the advent of Islam and some of these battles lasted for more than a hundred years. Abdul-Aziz Sälem believes that the number of Arabs battles was so great as to be uncountable. He states that the examples he mentions comprised only a small percentage of all wars and conflicts, which were significantly important in pre-Islamic Arabia (Sälem 2001, 328).

2. The continuance of pre-Islamic culture of violence on Islamic culture and knowledge

I propose, “Violent perspectives and interpretations are born from violent history and culture”. Before the advent of Islam and during the early years of this religion, Arabian society was affected by its violent history and culture. This violence had been institutionalized in various aspects of the society during a period of several centuries. Whatever comes out of a violent history and culture will always be mixed with a hint of violence; this includes the interpretations

of Islam and the sociopolitical actions that have been taken in the name of the Islam since the beginning of Islamic history. Therefore, it was natural that from the very advent of Islam, various violent images, interpretations, and actions were presented about this religion, which had their roots in the history, culture and ignorant society of the Arabian Peninsula of those times.

The advent Islam brought huge amount of changes and unique developments for the pre-Islamic ignorant society of the Arabian Peninsula. However, a large proportion of the inherent nature and traits of the people and society, which had their roots deep inside the society and were transferred from generation to generation, survived in the inner layers of their culture. The important point here, which Abdul-Aziz Sälem refers to, is that the inherent nature of violence and anger subsided to some extent after the advent of Islam. However, a little less than half a century later, this violent nature reemerged in a more extreme and intense manner (Sälem 2001, 316).

The concept of violence and the tendency towards war and bloodshed, dominance and pride, went into a short hibernation within Arabian society at the dawn of Islam. This violent nature, which had been deeply linked with feelings of heroism and honor in their minds and souls, subsided for a short period during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), because of the peaceful and humanitarian teachings of Islam. However, immediately after the demise of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), this violent nature reemerged, and this time it resulted in numerous and countless crimes and acts of violence and bloodshed for centuries. This violence was fused with Islamic and ideological beliefs and motivations, but had its roots in the selfish nature of the people and their historical culture of violence.

At the same time, the people with swords in their hands who were killing people on the battlefields and in the cities in the name of Islam—but actually in pursuit of their own interests and desires—were not the only ones acting out their inherent violent seeking nature. Their brothers in scholarly fields were also busy as religious scholars and intellectuals, holding a pen in their hands and teaching and interpreting Islam. What the men of the sword and the pen had in common was having grown up in the same culture of dominance and violence. It was from this point that non-peaceful interpretations of the teachings of Islam and violent narrations regarding the history of Islam flourished. Even the pioneer historians and narrators of Islamic history from the very time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) narrated events from a violent perspective, and wrote Islamic history according to such a framework, in the process producing what we call the “violent history” of Islam. As such, interpretations of the Holy Quran, Islamic teachings and the traditions of the Prophet (PBUH) have been influenced by “violent history” and a “violent culture” from the very beginning of Islam until the present day.

In addition to the field of historiography, this spirit of violence also influenced various Islamic fields of study. The consequences of such influences can be seen in the violence in the Middle East today. One reason is that today’s violence in the Middle East is based on the same historical events, sources, and interpretations.

Thus, the nature and roots of today’s violence in the Middle East is has four components: First: cultural history, meaning the culture and history of pre-Islamic ignorance and post-Islamic history;

Second: religious, meaning interpretive religion or people’s perception of Islam;

Third: sociocultural, which refers to the current cultural situation in Middle Eastern societies;

Fourth: political, which has played a role in all eras and is playing a stronger role in Middle East violence today than ever before.

The chart below shows the components of violence in the Middle East and their relationship to each other.

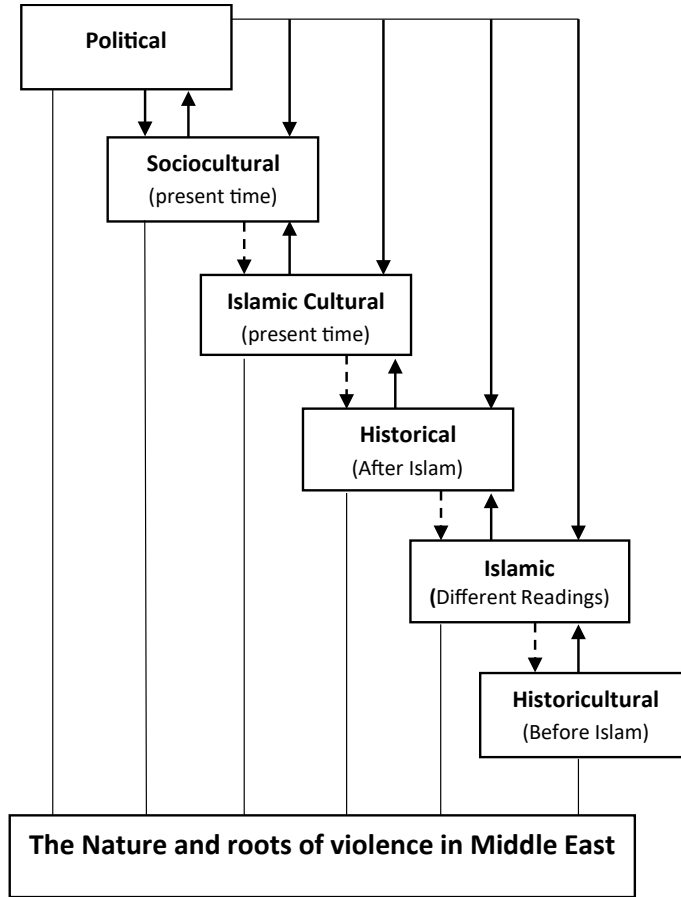


Figure 2: Components of violence in the Middle East and their impact on each other (Historipoliticulturereligious)

Conclusion

Socio-political changes in the Middle East are fast, complicated, and sometimes accompanied by violence and bleeding. However, a chronic, hidden and permanent violence in the Middle East and some Islamic countries seems to be endless reproducing itself every time in a new way. The common denominator of all of them from the past to the present is the cultural and religious motive of this violence.

The first part of the article tried to reveals that violence in the Middle East is related to religious factors in four ways: First, they refer directly to the teachings of Islam and consider themselves the spokesperson of Islam or representative of God. Second, they are indirectly influenced by Islamic culture, customs and social habits, or they have even Islamized some of their cultural superstitions and beliefs and consider them Islamic. Third, they use the religion of Islam as a tool for their political, social, and economic goals and interests, and employ the masses in the name of Islam. Fourth, a

combination of any of the above three may occur.

In the second part of the article, the verses of war and Jihad in the Quran were discussed very briefly to clarify that the Quran does not allow any violence to any Muslim for any reason. Only defense is allowed as necessary.

But the third part of the article believes that the violence in the Middle East today, which is carried out in the name of Islam and with reference to Islamic teachings, has nothing to do with Islam as a divine and ethical religion, but entered this religion from the pre-Islamic ignorance period. It has caused, the religion of Islam in the theoretical, scholarly, political and historical fields, has been interpreted and narrated in a violent cycle throughout history.

The important question that arises in this conclusion is that; in order to put an end to violence and extremism in the Middle East, can religious extremist activists and groups be convinced that Islam is a religion of peace, friendship and love and is opposed to any kind of violence? Alternatively, will the end of violence only be achieved through secular governments in the region? This question is difficult to answer and requires in-depth research. However at first glance it seems that religious activists, groups and governments cannot be easily persuaded not to resort to violence for the purposes they consider Islamic and the implementation of Sharia. On the other hand, probably violence cannot be eradicated from the region, even with the rise of secular governments, contrariwise, violence will likely be escalated as individuals and groups claiming to be Islam and God's representatives, propagate that the divine religion is being destroyed and they attract followers for themselves to save the divine religion. Violence, extremism and worthlessness of human lives in the Middle East are rooted in the culture of selfishness, Ignorance, and attitudes of some Islamic societies. However, some approaches of Islamic knowledge and schools are also effective in creating such attitudes.

Perhaps a better way to reduce violence in the Middle East is to work on public culture, and increase knowledge and rationality.

Notes

- (1) a.alikhani@ut.ac.ir
- (2) These two combined concepts is probably for the first time to be used.
- (3) The biographies of the leaders of the extremist groups illustrate this well (see Ramezan 2019, 27–60).
- (4) Within the Qurānic context, for example, when the concept of impiety is discussed and at the end it is highlighted that God dislikes the sinners and impious people, it is implied that you should not commit sin or be impious. Or when the Qurān says that God loves the ones who believe in Him, it means that people should believe in God. In other words, when in a verse it is mentioned that God likes or dislikes certain things, it is in fact a kind of command or prohibition.
- (5) This verse is related to a year after *Hudeybiyah* peace agreement, when Prophet Muhammad and some Muslims started their journey of Hajj and the idolaters of Mecca wanted to attack the Muslims without any prior warnings; even though the month of Dhu al-Qīdah was considered one of the four *Haram* months, during which fighting is prohibited, the Muslims were attacked by their enemies.
- (6) This combined concept is probably for the first time to be used.

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