



TONY BLAIR  
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CHANGE

# The State of Debate Within Islam:

## Theological Developments in the Muslim World Since 9/11

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USAMA HASAN

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## Executive Summary

The issues in the Muslim world that led to the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 have been vigorously contested in the two decades since. What is more, it is not only Western countries that have lost thousands of civilians, soldiers and security personnel due to extremism since 9/11. During this period, the Muslim world has lost many more civilians and members of the armed and security forces, killed by violence caused by Islamist extremism.

The past two decades have also seen intensified debates in the Muslim world on ideological issues, as the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath laid bare internal problems to do with extremism, Islamism, Islam-state dynamics and relations with the rest of the world.

Detailed data from the Global Extremism Monitor (GEM), published by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, show that in just the two years 2017 and 2018, over 33,000 civilians and nearly 18,000 security personnel were killed around the world due to violent Islamist extremism. In the same period, a further 70,000 people who had joined Islamist extremist groups died in clashes with security forces or terrorist attacks. This adds up to over 120,000 casualties, the vast majority of whom were Muslims.

By extrapolating these GEM data, the Institute estimates that since 9/11, there have been tens of thousands of Muslim civilian victims of Islamist terrorist attacks as well as thousands of non-Muslim ones. The former have comprised lay Muslims, imams, Islamic clerics, Muslim activists and aid workers. Islamic sites targeted in Islamist terrorist attacks include mosques and shrines of saints that are places of pilgrimage for many Muslims. Thus, the Muslim world has been as traumatised by violent Islamist extremism as the rest of the world – if not more so – over the past two decades.

Islamist extremist violence will never be solved without a resolution of underlying ideological issues in the Muslim world. Despite the awful statistics about violence, the good news is that significant intellectual and theological developments have taken place in the Muslim world over the past 20 years to address and resolve many of these issues. The issues in question relate

especially to the struggle between progressive, modernising forces and regressive, fundamentalist ones for the soul of Islam. Both sides in this struggle were arguably galvanised by 9/11 and its aftermath.

According to the Institute's open-source research, senior Islamic clerics, political leaders and community leaders have issued over 120 major fatwas and statements against extremist and terrorist groups since 1998. These declarations have been published in over 60 countries, including every nation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The fatwas have been issued by the official grand muftis of many countries and by the OIC's official fatwa body. Thus, they represent the theological positions of thousands of Muslim clerics and Islamic scholars who influence hundreds of millions of Muslims. Original research presented in this report shows that the 175 leading Muslim scholars who signed an open letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of ISIS, between 2014 and 2019 have a combined social media following of over 85 million on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.

Furthermore, at least a dozen major international Islamic charters and declarations have been issued in the past 20 years. These initiatives have covered the four ideological foundations of Islamist extremism, human and women's rights, the rights of non-Muslims in Muslim-majority countries, the rejection of theological justifications of violence by Islamist terrorist groups, the promotion of human co-existence, support for scientific endeavour and climate change.

This report summarises some of these debates, with an emphasis on good news and positive developments in the Muslim world since 9/11. It also identifies gaps in these debates and highlights some areas that need further attention and discussion.

Governments, policymakers and decision-makers should take note of the intense ongoing debates in the Muslim world. They should enable and support those voices and forces that are more open, inclusive and universalist with respect to the rest of the world. Such forces are more likely to be durable allies in efforts to build a shared, equitable future for humanity.

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## Introduction

In a historic speech at the American University in Cairo in 2009, co-hosted by Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest seats of learning in the world, then US President Barack Obama declared he was seeking “a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world”. He went on: “As a student of history, I also know civilization’s debt to Islam. It was Islam – at places like Al-Azhar – that carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe’s Renaissance and Enlightenment.”<sup>1</sup>

This new beginning was necessary because of the moment that had defined the presidential term of Obama’s predecessor, George W. Bush: the 9/11 attacks, carried out by a nonstate terrorist group harboured by a fundamentalist, Islamist regime.

Eight years on from Obama’s Cairo speech, and after he had been succeeded by a US president far less sympathetic to Islam, Sheikh Yahya Cholil Staquf, head of Indonesia’s Nahdat Ul Ulama – a national league of Muslim clerics numbering tens of millions – declared that certain basic assumptions in traditional Islam were problematic:

*“The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, the relationship of Muslims with the state, and Muslims’ relationship to the prevailing legal system wherever they live ... within the classical tradition, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is assumed to be one of segregation and enmity.*

*Perhaps there were reasons for this during the Middle Ages, when the tenets of Islamic orthodoxy were established, but in today’s world such a doctrine is unreasonable. To the extent that Muslims adhere to this view of Islam, it renders them incapable of living harmoniously and peacefully within the multi-cultural, multi-religious societies of the 21st century.”<sup>2</sup>*

Staquf might have overstated the “enmity” between Muslims and non-Muslims in the Middle Ages, for there were great periods of co-existence in Abbasid Baghdad, Umayyad Andalusia, Mughal India and Ottoman Europe.

But he struck at the core of the contemporary Muslim challenge: unthinkingly applying medieval interpretations of Islam to modern societies results in enormous problems, including extremism and terrorism; the world of Islam must continue to modernise not only in science and technology but also in thoughts, ideas, ethos and spirit, while retaining its timeless, transcendent values linked to the sacred and the divine.

The 9/11 attacks prompted an intense flurry of dialogue and engagement between the Western and Islamic worlds, deepening their pre-existing overlap, as well as more intra-Muslim dialogue. This discussion led to several major international Islamic charters and declarations over the past two decades that have had a profound impact on societies around the world – and will continue to do so. Some of these developments, particularly the intra-Muslim dialogue, have not received the attention they deserve in global policy circles.

This report charts the trajectory of these major developments, from intra-Muslim and interfaith dialogue to the modernisation of medieval interpretations of Islam and universal calls for modern, global citizenship based on shared civilisational values.

## **THE STATE OF DEBATE IN THE MUSLIM WORLD BEFORE 9/11**

Throughout the 20th century, Islamist movements were established in all parts of the Muslim world, where they flourished and were exported to other corners of the globe, including Western countries. These movements tapped into anticolonial sentiment in the first half of the century and transformed this sentiment into anti-Western discourse after the establishment of newly independent Muslim-majority nation-states.

Islamism surged after 1979, a year of key developments: the Islamic Revolution of Iran; the Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel; the Siege of Mecca, orchestrated by proto-al-Qaeda, hardline Salafi-jihadis; and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The geopolitics of the Muslim world in the 1980s were extremely complex, and Islamist governments and movements were ubiquitous. Major developments in this decade were numerous: Afghan insurgents waged jihad against the Soviets, supported by the US via Pakistan, where President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq implemented the official Islamisation of the country and promoted fundamentalist, Islamist interpretations of Islam. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was assassinated by Salafi-jihadis for making peace with Israel. An Islamist uprising in the Syrian city of Hama was brutally repressed by President Hafez al-Assad. The Iran-Iraq war was begun by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, who feared Iran exporting its Islamic Revolution to his

Shia-majority country. Israel invaded Lebanon and occupied the southern part of the country to eliminate the Palestine Liberation Organisation's bases there, leading to the formation of Shia Islamist militant group Hizbullah. And the first Palestinian intifada was declared, triggering the rise of Sunni Islamist organisation Hamas.

In an illustration of Islamist influence in the Muslim world in the 1980s, the Islamic Fiqh [Jurisprudence] Academy, the official fatwa body of the Muslim World League (MWL), issued two near-identical statements at its 1987 summit on the Afghan and Palestinian jihads. These calls to the Islamic world obliged Muslims to religiously support these jihads with fighters, finance – including zakat – and all other material, moral, political and economic means available. The fatwas further described the Afghan jihad as “the jihad of Islam ... a great jihad” and the Palestinian jihad as “the conflict of our time involving Islam ... the blessed Islamic jihad”. The fatwas were signed by leading clerics from countries including India, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.<sup>3</sup>

Three years later, the OIC issued the Islamist-inspired Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, which contained a not-so-subtle dig at Western countries: article 11(a) on freedom was followed by article 11(b), a screed against colonialism.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990s, jihad fighters who had flocked to Afghanistan from across the Muslim world began to participate in other conflicts, such as those in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chechnya and Kashmir. One wing of this global jihad movement morphed into al-Qaeda under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. The decade had begun with Saddam's occupation of Kuwait, leading to the successful US effort to eject the Iraqi armed forces and liberate the country. America's establishment of military bases in Saudi Arabia became one of al-Qaeda's three core grievances, alongside Western support for Arab dictators and for Israel. In Algeria, the military's cancellation of elections that Islamists looked set to win sparked a chain of events that led to a bloody and brutal civil war.

By 2001, all Muslim-majority countries had strong Islamist influences and movements. Thus, while the governments of all Islamic nations officially condemned the 9/11 attacks, the Muslim world needed to tackle the underlying ideology that could lead to such violence in extreme cases.

## **THE SCALE OF SUFFERING IN THE MUSLIM WORLD DUE TO VIOLENT ISLAMIST EXTREMISM**

The Muslim world has suffered greatly from Islamist violence. Detailed data from the Institute's Global Extremism Monitor (GEM) show that in just the two years of 2017 and 2018, over 33,000 civilians and nearly 18,000 security personnel were killed around the world due to violent Islamist extremism. In the same period, a further 70,000 people who had joined Islamist extremist groups died in clashes with security forces or terrorist attacks. This adds up to over 120,000 casualties, with all the associated trauma and devastation wreaked on their families and communities: an enormous and unimaginable human cost. The vast majority of these casualties were Muslims.<sup>5</sup>

By extrapolating these data, the Institute estimates that since 9/11, there have been tens of thousands of Muslim civilian victims of Islamist terrorist attacks as well as thousands of non-Muslim ones. Among the former have been lay Muslims, imams, Islamic clerics, Muslim activists and aid workers. Islamic sites targeted in Islamist terrorist attacks have included mosques and shrines of saints that are places of pilgrimage for many Muslims.

Thus, the Muslim world has been as traumatised by violent Islamist extremism as the rest of the world – if not more so – over the past two decades. Being cognisant of this, religious and political leaders of the Muslim world have engaged in much soul searching since 9/11, resulting in intra-Muslim and interfaith dialogue and major modernisation projects to work towards civilisational cooperation based on shared values.

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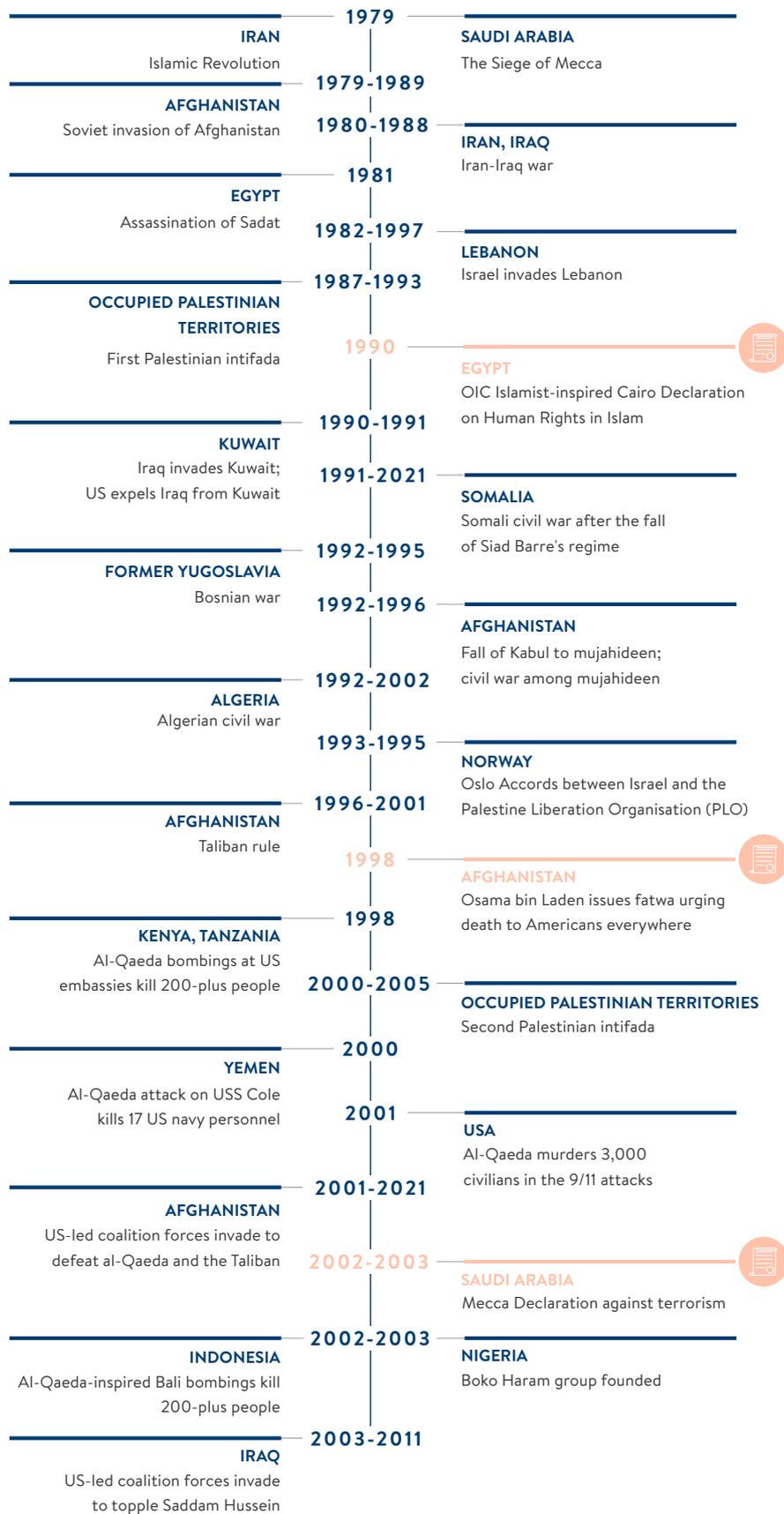
## **The Modernisation of Islam: Major Islamic Projects, Charters and Declarations Since 9/11**

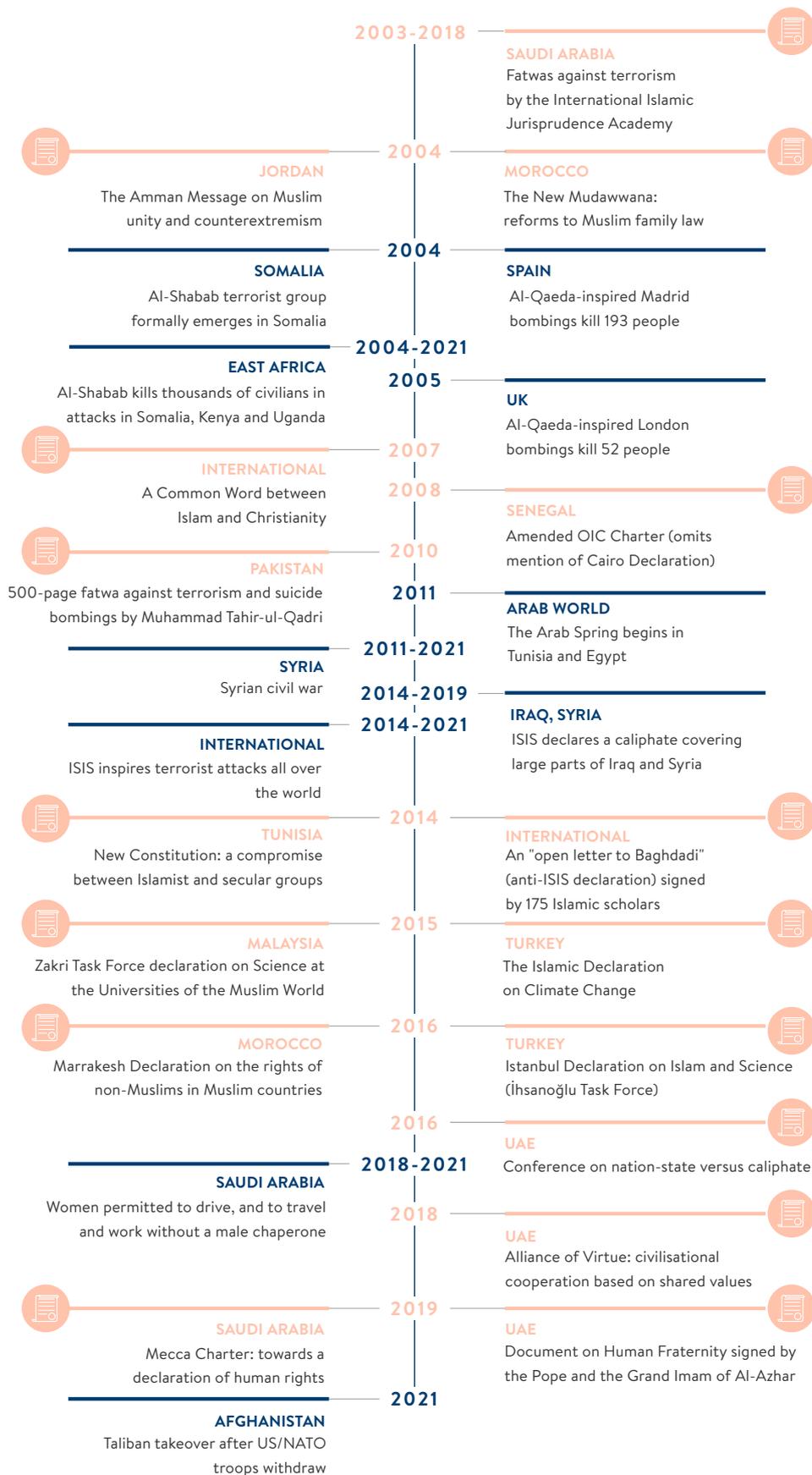
The 9/11 attacks revealed what the relentless anti-Western rhetoric of Islamist groups over the previous century could lead to. In the years that followed, Muslim communities, activists, imams, scholars, civil-society groups, politicians and leaders – female and male – grappled with the simmering tensions in the Muslim world that 9/11 had laid bare. A powerful imperative was to avoid the clash of civilisations that some thinkers had predicted would occur. This led to renewed intra-Muslim dialogue, interfaith and intercivilisational initiatives, as well as the immediate need to directly undermine terrorism's appeal to religion.

Over the next two pages, Figure 1 provides a timeline from 1979 to 2021 of major Islamic and Islamist declarations in their geopolitical context.

Figure 1

## TIMELINE OF MAJOR ISLAMIC AND ISLAMIST DECLARATIONS IN THEIR GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT, 1979–2021





## FATWAS AGAINST TERRORISM

Islamist extremists firmly believe that they have genuine religious authority for their views and actions. However, the same is true of Muslim counterterrorism actors. According to the Institute's open-source research, which captures a small snapshot of the Muslim world, senior Islamic clerics, political leaders and community leaders have issued over 120 major fatwas and statements in Arabic and English against extremist and terrorist groups since 1998. That is an average of almost one every two months.<sup>6</sup>

The most prominent of these antiterrorism fatwas include:

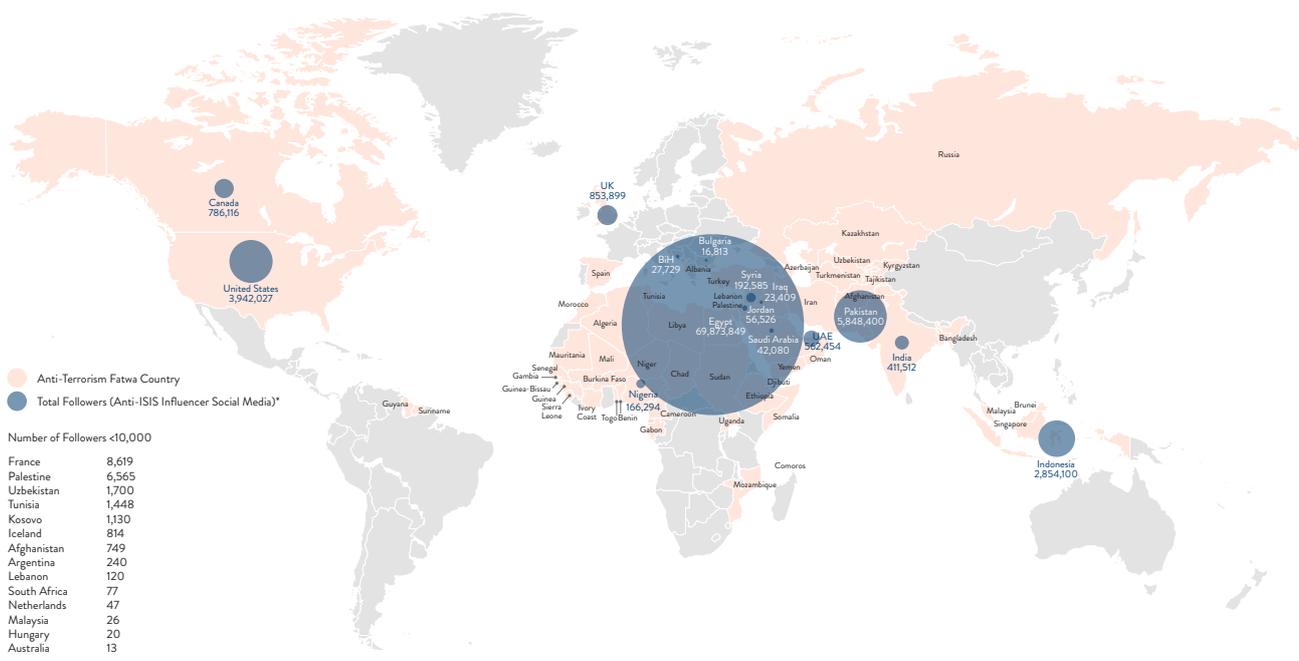
- the Mecca Declaration on Terrorism, issued in 2002 and again in 2003 by the Islamic Fiqh [Jurisprudence] Academy<sup>7</sup>
- the 500-page Fatwa Against Terrorism and Suicide Bombing, written in 2010 by the Pakistani cleric Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, which received global media coverage<sup>8</sup>
- the 2014 open letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, self-styled caliph of ISIS, signed by 175 leading Muslim scholars<sup>9</sup>
- fatwas of the International Islamic Fiqh [Jurisprudence] Academy (IIFA), the official fatwa body of the OIC, which represents the entire Muslim world. The IIFA issued strong condemnations of terrorism at Doha in 2003, Amman in 2006 and Medina in 2018<sup>10</sup>

These and other fatwas and statements were published in over 60 countries, including every member of the OIC. The fatwas were issued by the official grand muftis of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and many other countries as well as by the IIFA. Thus, the declarations represent the theological positions of hundreds of thousands of Muslim clerics and Islamic scholars around the world. Figure 2 depicts the geographical spread of countries where counterterrorism fatwas have been issued to date.

Because the Islamic theologians, clerics, scholars and leaders who have issued counterterrorism fatwas face inevitable death threats, intimidation and violence, there is much self-censorship by the Islamic religious and political leadership. For example, at least two British imams who signed an anti-ISIS fatwa have been subjected to death threats and physical attacks.<sup>11</sup> Several Muslim clerics and leaders have paid for their outspoken views against extremism and terrorism with their lives. The Pakistani Islamic scholar Javed Ghamidi was forced into exile in 2010 after surviving a terrorist plot; some of his associates were killed.<sup>12</sup> In 2014, ISIS militants killed the grand imam of Mosul mosque, along with a fellow imam, for refusing to join them.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 2

MAP OF ANTITERRORISM FATWAS AND INFLUENCERS



\*Total social media following (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram & YouTube) of official signatories to the Letter to Baghdadi in 2014.

Source: TBI analysis

A senior Muslim cleric in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who was highly critical of Islamist militants, was killed in 2021.<sup>14</sup> Without this deadly intimidation, countless more of the millions of Muslim clerics and leaders around the world would be more outspoken.

Our Institute estimates that the reach of these fatwas and statements extends to hundreds of millions of Muslims (see Figure 2). Our research shows that the 175 leading Muslim scholars who signed the 2014 open letter to Baghdadi have a combined social media following of over 85 million across four platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. This figure does not indicate 85 million unique people but is a measure of social media impressions. Some influencers post multiple times a day, others less frequently, but this figure gives an idea of the reach of messaging that promotes more enlightened interpretations of Islam than those favoured by extremist and terrorist groups.

Furthermore, at least a dozen major international Islamic charters and declarations have been issued in the past 20 years, averaging more than one every two years. These initiatives have covered, among other topics: the four ideological foundations of Islamist extremism; human and women's rights; the rights of non-Muslims in Muslim-majority countries; the rejection of theological justifications of violence by Islamist terrorist groups; the rejection of Sunni Islamist groups' theological insistence on a caliphate; the promotion of human co-existence based on shared values; support for scientific endeavour; and climate change.

### What Is a Fatwa?

A fatwa is simply a religious edict from a Muslim cleric, usually in answer to a question. A fatwa can be as short as one or two lines, or run to hundreds of pages. Someone qualified to give a fatwa is called a mufti. Most Islamic scholars can serve as a mufti, although the etiquette is to avoid giving fatwas as much as possible, since it is effectively speaking in God's name.

Many Muslim-majority countries, and others with sizeable and organised Muslim communities, have senior councils of muftis and a grand mufti, the most authoritative source of fatwas for that country. The OIC also has an official fatwa institution, known as the International Islamic Fiqh [Jurisprudence] Academy (IIFA). The Muslim World League has a similar institution with a very similar name: the Islamic Fiqh [Jurisprudence] Academy. The major Islamic declarations described in this report are effectively collective fatwas.

## ECUMENICAL ISLAM AND SHIA-SUNNI UNITY

Arguably the first major Islamic global initiative after 9/11 was the 2004 Amman Message, initiated by King Abdullah II of Jordan. This message focused on increasing tolerance and mutual respect among Muslim groups and sects as well as absolving Islam of extremism and violence. The message's authors described its fundamental aim as follows: "It sought to declare what Islam is and what it is not, and what actions represent it and what actions do not. Its goal was to clarify to the modern world the true nature of Islam and the nature of true Islam."<sup>15</sup>

The Amman Message has been signed and endorsed by over 500 Muslim scholars and leaders, including 33 heads of Muslim-majority states and dozens of grand muftis. The document's three main points are an inclusive approach to Muslim sects, the rejection of takfir – the practice of declaring

a Muslim to be an infidel – and the insistence on legitimate authority to speak in the name of Islam. The message also includes the following statement: “We denounce and condemn extremism, radicalism and fanaticism today, just as our forefathers tirelessly denounced and opposed them throughout Islamic history.”<sup>16</sup>

The ecumenical aspect of the Amman Message illustrates that it had already anticipated Obama’s call, in his 2009 speech in Cairo, for the Muslim world to close ranks and end sectarian strife: “Fault lines must be closed among Muslims ... as the divisions between Sunni and Shia have led to tragic violence, particularly in Iraq.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, besides Iraq, sectarian aspects of civil wars have also resurfaced in Syria and Yemen since the Amman Message.

### Islamist Participation in the Amman Message

Because the Amman Message was largely a response to al-Qaeda-inspired attacks on the US in 2001, Bali in 2002 and Madrid in 2004, the list of signatories included a handful of leading Islamist figures who oppose al-Qaeda but nevertheless support other groups involved in violent extremism.

The most prominent figures in this category are Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.<sup>18</sup> Both have served as leading spiritual and political figures in Iran’s Shia Islamist, Khomeinist regime, which includes the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and which has inspired Hezbollah in Lebanon.

From the Sunni Islamist world, signatories to the Amman Message included Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who justified attacks on Israeli civilians throughout the 1990s and 2000s by arguing that there was no such thing as an adult Israeli civilian because the country’s compulsory national service means that Israeli society is militarised and that “their women are not like our women”.<sup>19</sup> He also argued that every country in the world was *dar al-islam* (a land of Islam) or *dar al-sulh* (a land of peace), with one exception: Israel, the only country he categorised as *dar al-harb* (a land of war).<sup>20</sup>

Aside from these strongly Islamist figures, the vast majority of the signatories to the Amman Message may be described as anti-Islamist, non-Islamist or, at least, critical of Islamism. Furthermore, it can be argued that the inclusion of Islamist figures among the signatories was repudiated by later developments, such as the decisions by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are also represented among the document’s signatories, to blacklist Qaradawi for some of his views.<sup>21</sup>

## GLOBAL COOPERATION AMONG THE WORLD'S MAJOR RELIGIONS

The ecumenical momentum generated by the Amman Message was not limited to the Muslim world but soon extended to the only religion with more adherents than Islam: Christianity. Three years after the Amman Message, a striking dialogue and cooperation movement was launched between the world's two numerically largest religions. Christianity has over 2 billion followers, while Islam has just under 2 billion.<sup>22</sup>

A Common Word, a Muslim-Christian dialogue project initiated by Muslim leaders in 2007, has brought together leading theologians of both faiths and inspired dialogue in venues from places of worship to top universities.<sup>23</sup> The project's official website lists nearly 1,000 press articles that have been carried by thousands of outlets. Given that in 2020, almost a third of the world's population was Christian in some sense, while another quarter was Muslim, these two faiths together represent well over half of the world's population.<sup>24</sup>

These statistics underline the need for Christian-Muslim dialogue worldwide. As leading Christian theologian Hans Küng has noted, peace among the world's nations requires peace among religions, which, in turn, requires dialogue between religions.<sup>25</sup> A peacebuilding dialogue with the potential to include over half of the world's population is therefore a brilliant recent contribution that was initiated in the Muslim world. The idea also increases hope for the realisation of an Islamo-Christian civilisation, which would be a major force for good, stability and peace in the world.<sup>26</sup>

After a decade of intense Christian-Muslim dialogue and action inspired by A Common Word, in 2019 the Pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar – major spiritual leaders of the Christian and Muslim worlds – co-signed in Abu Dhabi the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, in a move enabled by the UAE government.<sup>27</sup> The document draws on biblical and Quranic teachings and emphasises universal, shared values: “This Document may constitute an invitation to reconciliation and fraternity among all believers, indeed among believers and non-believers, and among all people of good will.” This project has led to the declaration of 4 February as an annual Human Fraternity Day, recognised by the United Nations (UN).

Interfaith alliances have not been limited to Christianity and Islam. The New Alliance of Virtue, launched in 2018 by Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars, was inspired by the pre-Islamic Alliance of Virtues charter, in whose issuing the Prophet Muhammad participated in Mecca.<sup>28</sup> The 2018 document aims to oppose religious persecution and uphold universal human rights inspired by religious traditions in an age of increasing globalisation and secularism.

The charter is based on the principles of human dignity, freedom of conscience and religion or belief, tolerance, justice, peace, mercy, kindness, keeping covenants and solidarity. Its objectives are working with religious leaders to promote peace, encouraging positive citizenship, ensuring mutual respect among world faiths, protecting minority rights and supporting international accords.<sup>29</sup>

## TOWARDS A UNIVERSAL ISLAMIC DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Alongside the intense global interfaith activity generated by A Common Word, the Document on Human Fraternity and the New Alliance of Virtue, internal Muslim conversations have also accelerated in the period since 9/11, which saw the rise and fall of ISIS in Iraq and Syria from 2014 to 2019.

The Mecca Charter was issued at the 2019 annual conference of the Muslim World League (MWL), which has been headquartered in Mecca since it was established in 1962. The MWL has offices in most of the world's countries, and each office is linked to the Saudi embassy in that country. The Mecca Charter conference was held under the patronage of King Salman of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia promoted Islamism for many decades. For example, the Saudi Ministry of Education published at least six editions of Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Qutb's key work *Milestones* as a school textbook in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, Riyadh propagated Qutb's insistence that the modern world pitted Islam against non-Islam, or *jahiliyyah* (ignorance), and that Qutb and his new community would save Islam and the world by adhering to pure Islam and refusing to compromise with *jahiliyyah*.

By contrast, the Saudi-sponsored Mecca Charter confirmed an astonishing but welcome transformation over recent years in Saudi Arabia's stated outlook on Islam's place in the world: as an equal partner, not as a supremacist religion. The Mecca Charter comprises 30 comprehensive principles, the first few of which are:

*All people, regardless of their different ethnicities, races and nationalities, are equal under God.*

*We reject religious and ethnic claims of "preference".*

*Differences among people in their beliefs, cultures and natures are part of God's will and wisdom.*

*Religious and cultural diversity never justifies conflict. Humanity needs positive, civilised partnerships and effective interaction. Diversity must be a bridge to dialogue, understanding and cooperation for the benefit of all humanity.<sup>31</sup>*

Guest speakers at the Mecca Charter conference included an unprecedentedly diverse representation of Muslim groups and sects, both Sunni and Shia, speaking in Islam's holiest city. Among those addressing the conference was even a qadi, or judge, of the Lebanese Druze, a sect often regarded as heretical by mainstream Sunni and Shia Islam.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the Mecca Charter and the range of Muslim leaders who endorsed it at its launch conference began to promote Saudi-sponsored diversity and respectful co-existence, both in the Muslim world and in Muslims' relationship with the rest of the world.

The importance of the Mecca Charter does not stop there: the document also represents an implicit critique of the nominally sharia-based Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, issued by the OIC in 1990.<sup>33</sup> This declaration, as its name implies, attempted to provide an Islamic alternative to the UN's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights in a typically Islamist example of separatism and division and an effort to create a parallel society, this time on a global scale.

The fact that the Cairo Declaration was politically motivated is evident from the fact that it was issued by the foreign ministers of OIC countries, not by Muslim human-rights groups, which tend to be anti-Islamist, given Islamism's appalling record on human rights. Indeed, the preamble of the Cairo Declaration confirms that it was partly inspired by an OIC meeting held in Tehran in 1989 after a decade of consolidation of Islamist power in Iran. For OIC countries, the Cairo Declaration reversed some of the progress that had been made in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights over four decades earlier.<sup>34</sup>

### The OIC's Distancing From the Cairo Declaration

The OIC's 1972 founding charter had attracted reservations from several participating Muslim-majority countries – Chad, Indonesia, Lebanon and Turkey – due to their secular or multireligious constitutions. Meanwhile, pre-Khomeinist Iran had insisted that the UN Charter would always take precedence over the OIC charter.<sup>35</sup> The OIC's 1990 Cairo Declaration explicitly contradicted various UN agreements, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The OIC's IIFA reiterated the Cairo Declaration in 1996 and 2001.<sup>36</sup>

However, the OIC later distanced itself from the declaration in 2008 by omitting all mention of it from its revised charter and repeatedly promoting the importance of the UN Charter. This revised OIC charter was registered with the UN in 2017.<sup>37</sup> The 2019 Mecca Charter further confirmed the demise of the Cairo Declaration.

## Confronting the Ideology of Islamist Extremism

In the decade after 9/11, major initiatives from the Muslim world sought to oppose al-Qaeda's attempts to provoke a global war between Muslims and others. The rapid rise of ISIS, an offshoot of al-Qaeda, in 2014 – with its associated horrific levels of murder, enslavement, sexual slavery, genocide and other war crimes – provoked further intense reaction from the Muslim world.

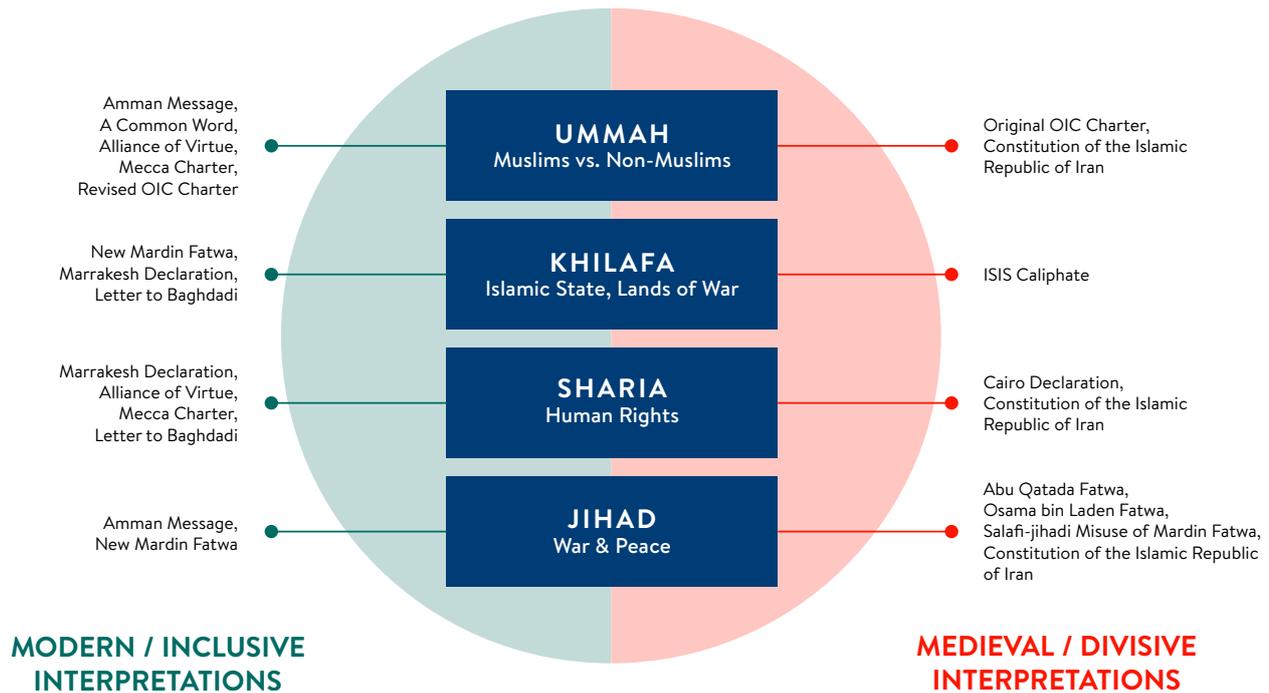
In particular, the 2014 open letter to Baghdadi directly addressed some of the ideological foundations of Islamist extremism, although perhaps in a roundabout way. To confront these foundations head on, it is first necessary to understand what they consist of and how the logic of Islamism operates.

Islamism refers to a spectrum of fundamentalist Muslim groups that share a totalitarian, political interpretation of Islam. Guilain Denoeux, a professor of government at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, provides a concise definition of Islamism and Islamist utopianism: “A form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organisations that pursue political objectives. It provides political responses to today’s societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundation for which rests on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition.”<sup>38</sup> The most extreme examples of Sunni and Shia Islamism are represented by al-Qaeda and ISIS and by Iran, respectively.<sup>39</sup>

Islamism can be characterised as having four main foundations: the ummah, the caliphate, the sharia and jihad.<sup>40</sup> In Islamism, these are particular interpretations of classical Islamic concepts. These basic Islamic or Quranic notions are thus contested between medieval or Islamist and inclusive or modern interpretations (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

#### FOUR PRINCIPLES OF ISLAM CONTESTED BETWEEN MAINSTREAM ISLAM AND ISLAMISM



Source: TBI analysis

### THE LOGIC OF ISLAMISM

The logic on which Islamism is based proceeds in four stages.<sup>41</sup> First, all Muslims worldwide comprise the ummah, or Muslim nation, as a unified global community and in a binary and exclusive sense – that is, as opposed to non-Muslims. A related concept is the Islamist understanding of *al-wala wal-bara* (loyalty and disavowal), in which every Muslim's loyalty is only to Islam and other Muslims, simultaneously disavowing non-Muslims and all non-Islamic religions, philosophies, creeds and ideologies.<sup>42</sup>

Second, once this binary world view of Muslims and non-Muslims is adopted, it effectively defines all Muslims worldwide as a separate nation. Hence, the idea of a caliphate – a separate Islamic nation-state for all Muslims of the world – follows immediately.

The logic of Shia Islamism or Khomeinism is similar, but the dominant political model of Sunni Islam, the caliphate, is replaced by an imamate. Followers of mainstream Shia Islam, known as the Twelvers, believe that the current, rightful imam or leader of all Muslims, especially Shias, has been in occultation for over a millennium, and they await his return as a messianic figure before the end of time. Khomeinism introduced the concept of *velayat-e-faqih* (rule by jurists) to justify the reign of the ayatollahs in the absence of the Hidden Imam and until his return.<sup>43</sup>

Third, on achieving such a caliphate or imamate, it must be governed by a state law. Islamists apply their understanding of sharia as state law, to be enforced on the caliphate's subjects. Islamist interpretations of the sharia tend to be inimical in many ways to modern notions of human rights.

## Islamists deploy the concept of jihad to justify resistance, insurgency, revolution and terrorism.

Finally, such a sharia-governed Islamic state – the only legitimate nation-state for all Muslims worldwide – must be defended and expanded through jihad. Islamists understand this concept by focusing on its military aspects and often ignoring the wider inner and social aspects of jihad. When carrying out physical or military jihad, some Islamists ignore the substantial Islamic tradition of ethics in warfare. In this manner, Islamists deploy the concept of jihad to justify resistance, insurgency, revolution and terrorism and to wage war relentlessly for the defence and expansion of an idealised Islamic state.

Because Islamism is based on knitting together very particular interpretations of these four Quranic terms, mainstream Islam must confront these interpretations head on, especially by emphasising inclusive and broader understandings of these terms that are more in harmony with the progressive spirit of the modern world. The following sections outline how this can be done and how major Islamic projects over the past two decades have begun to repudiate Islamist extremism directly. These examples show how Muslim religious scholarship has taken the lead in tackling the major assumptions of Islamist extremism from a theological and scriptural basis.

## The Ummah: The Muslim Nation

The idea of the global Muslim community as one unified nation, or ummah, is appealing to many and has positive aspects, such as an emphasis on uniting Muslims across racial and tribal boundaries. However, the ummah becomes the first foundation of the Islamist mindset in a divisive way, creating an us-versus-them, Muslim-versus-non-Muslim mentality. This negative, tribal interpretation of the ummah leads to the related Islamist concept of *al-wala wal-bara* (loyalty and disavowal), in which allegiance becomes binary: loyalty to Islam and Muslims goes hand-in-hand with disavowal of non-Islam and non-Muslims.

The 2015 Muslim Reform Movement Declaration, a Muslim civil-society initiative, included as one of its core principles: “Our ummah – our community – is not just Muslims, but all of humanity.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the Mecca Charter and the New Alliance of Virtue emphatically declared the equality and unity of one humanity under one God.

Navigating inclusive versus exclusive interpretations of the ummah is therefore a basic question for the Muslim world. In particular, the OIC charter, despite many progressive revisions in 2008, refers repeatedly to the ummah in unclear terms. This lends itself easily to exploitation by Islamist groups of the idea of the ummah as a global Muslim nation that is separate from non-Muslims and requires an Islamic state as part of its national self-determination.

Thus, OIC and general Muslim discourse needs to be clearer about what is meant by the ummah in the context of modern political realities. The OIC’s religious jurists in the IIFA repeatedly refer to the ummah in a very Islamist sense.<sup>45</sup>

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## The Caliphate: The Muslim Nation-State

The Islamist approach narrows the wider Quranic meaning of *khilafa* (caliphate) as a legitimate, representative and authoritative Muslim government that upholds justice and the rule of law. It also narrows the historical reality, endorsed by leading Islamic theologians and jurists past and present, of multiple caliphates, sultanates and Islamic states that co-existed for centuries and are the religious basis of the validity of multiple Muslim-majority nation-states today.

The caliphate was the dominant political model of Sunni Islam for 13 centuries. Islamists wish to revive it as the nation-state of a divisive conception of the ummah. Related to this is the medieval Islamic theory of international relations known as *siyar*, advanced for its time but now obsolete since being superseded by modern realities. Medieval *siyar* divides the world in a binary fashion into *dar al-islam* (the house of Islam) and *dar al-kufr* (the house of infidelity). The former is envisaged as a peaceful land, while the latter is subdivided into *dar al-sulh* (lands covered by peace treaties) and *dar al-harb* (lands of war).

It is thinking based on *dar al-harb* that, for Islamists, justifies violence in apparently peaceful societies. In the minds of terrorists, such thinking legitimised all major al-Qaeda attacks before, after and including 9/11 – as well as ISIS's violence. For the subsidiaries of al-Qaeda and ISIS across Africa and Asia – from groups such as Boko Haram factions in West Africa to al-Shabab in East Africa and similar organisations across the Arab world, South Asia and Southeast Asia – these medieval political notions are crucial to reject the modern, international order and wage endless violent campaigns.

Islamists also wish to replace the modern nation-state-based international system with this medieval, binary world view. Thus, Islamist extremism rejects the modern nation-state and the UN, preferring separatism on a global scale.

## THE MODERNISATION OF MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC POLITICAL MODELS

How can mainstream Islam counter Islamists' use of medieval ideas to reject contemporary nation-states? By modernising Islamic political models.

Two significant initiatives showcase this approach: the 2010 New Mardin Fatwa and the 2016 conference in the UAE on the nation-state versus the caliphate.

### The 2010 New Mardin Fatwa on Land, War and Peace

Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah's 14th-century Mardin Fatwa recognised, perhaps for the first time, a complex situation in which a particular town is neither a land of war nor a land of peace but has an intermediate or compound nature (*dar murakkab*). The traditional, neat divisions of land and associated allegiances between Islam and non-Islam no longer applied to the town of Mardin, in modern-day Turkey. The settlement had previously been part of the lands of Islam but was subsequently occupied by Mongol invaders, who did not rule by Islamic laws or norms – although many of the town's inhabitants were Muslims.

In 2010, over a dozen leading Muslim scholars gathered in Mardin to denounce the misuse of Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwa by groups engaged in takfir and/or terrorism. The declaration of this conference is known as the New Mardin Fatwa and is significant for two main reasons.

**The original Mardin Fatwa had opened the doors to modern citizenship by breaking the previous, binary classification of the world.**

First, the declaration restored the intended meaning of the original fatwa. Some later manuscripts had corrupted the 14th-century text, replacing “non-Muslims must be treated (*yu'ama*) as they deserve” with “non-Muslims must be fought (*yuqatal*) as they deserve”. Since the 1960s, Salafi-jihadist groups had often referred to this corrupted text to justify violence against Muslim governments, which they deemed to be apostates, or non-Muslims. The New Mardin Fatwa emphasised the original text of the 14th-century fatwa and underlined that it did not support such violence against the rulers of Muslim-majority countries.

Second, the New Mardin Fatwa further emphasised that the original fatwa had opened the door to modern citizenship by breaking the previous, binary classification of the world into lands of peace or war. Ibn Taymiyyah's coining of a new phrase, *dar murakkab* (composite or compound land), represented nuanced jurisprudence to describe a new complexity in the 14th century. The New Mardin Fatwa recognised that seven centuries after the original declaration, there were likely to be many more elements of complexity in the modern world, especially when it came to dealing with religion-state relationships.

Thus, the 2010 New Mardin Fatwa attempted to wrestle simultaneously with two major elements of extremist Islamist thinking today: the justification of violence against Muslim governments and the insistence on binary political thinking in terms of lands of Islam and non-Islam.<sup>46</sup>

Regarding binary political thinking, the New Mardin Fatwa declared that the emergence of modern civilian states that safeguard religious, ethnic and national rights had “necessitated declaring the entire world a place of tolerance and peaceful co-existence between all religious groups and factions”.<sup>47</sup> This declaration made no exceptions for any country: the whole world was to be regarded as a place of peace, unlike Qaradawi's insistence that Israel is the only country that is a land of war.

In another development that illustrated the threat of Islamic intellectual activity to Islamist terrorism, al-Qaeda preacher Anwar al-Awlaki denounced the New Mardin Fatwa in writing, relying more on emotional arguments than on jurisprudential reasoning. He also used conspiratorial arguments to claim that the New Mardin Fatwa was “based on a new world order agenda”. He further railed against calls for interfaith dialogue, arguing that it was a Muslim obligation to fight other faiths until Islam gained total supremacy.<sup>48</sup>

### The 2016 Nation-State Versus Caliphate Conference

In 2016, while ISIS was busy defending and promoting its self-styled caliphate, an important conference attended by hundreds of Islamic scholars took place in the UAE. The theme of the conference was the concept of the nation-state and the question of whether this was a legitimate idea in Islam. This discussion was crucial because for about a century, Islamist groups had promoted the idea that nation-states were un-Islamic and that a global caliphate or unified Islamic state was the only possible political model for Muslims. Such Islamist ideas had led directly to the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran and to the emergence of ISIS.

The Islamic scholars at the conference answered the Islamist conception of a caliphate based on four considerations. First, they argued, the core Quranic concept of the caliphate relates to the human relationship with God and the world, particularly with regard to dealing justly. Second, the Sunni Islamic political model of the caliphate was clearly a human endeavour: at first, the caliph ruled all Muslims, but as the Muslim empires spread and communities grew, multiple caliphates co-existed and were validated by Islam's leading theologians and jurists. Third, the caliphate model was appropriate for empires past but must be rethought for the contemporary world.

Finally, based on all of the above, the theologians and jurists at the conference agreed that Muslims were not religiously obliged to set up a unified caliphate or Islamic state, as Islamist groups insist, but simply to focus on justice and good governance.



## Sharia: Islamic Law and Ethics

Sharia has historically been interpreted in many different ways, with dozens of schools of Islamic jurisprudence demonstrating a breathtaking diversity of juristic views and their underlying principles, known as *usul*. The Islamist understanding of sharia is only one such interpretation. Among the major developments in the Muslim world relating to interpretations of sharia over the past two decades, three areas stand out: religious freedom, women's rights and reforms to the *hudood*, or Islamic penal code.

### SHARIA AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The OIC's IIFA declared in 2015 that non-Muslims were to be treated as equals of Muslims in Muslim-majority states.<sup>49</sup> The following year, a high-profile international conference took place on the same topic, leading to the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration. Among the topics discussed at the conference was the authenticity of a medieval covenant that discriminated harshly against non-Muslims, particularly when it came to the building and maintenance of non-Muslim places of worship in Muslim societies – a controversial issue in many countries today. Meanwhile, the improving treatment of Christians in Pakistan offers valuable lessons on relations with non-Muslim minorities.

#### The 2016 Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Non-Muslims in Muslim-Majority States

The Marrakesh Declaration conference was held in January 2016 under the patronage of King Mohammed VI of Morocco and attended by hundreds of scholars from over 120 countries. The representatives were mainly Muslims, but there were also Christians, Iraqi Sabians and Jews. The conference was addressed by government ministers and senior Islamic scholars from numerous Muslim-majority countries, including Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Niger, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The Marrakesh Declaration built on the Common Word initiative and was inspired by the Prophet's Medina Charter, which created a multifaith city-state in which Muslims, Jews, Christians and polytheist Medinans were

committed to the common defence of their city. The Marrakesh Declaration called on leaders, politicians, governments, religious authorities and wider society to promote equal citizenship in Muslim-majority countries. It further affirmed that the objectives of the Medina Charter provided a suitable framework for national constitutions in Muslim-majority countries and that the UN Charter and related documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, were in harmony with the Medina Charter, including in terms of public order. Finally, the Marrakesh Declaration stated that it is unconscionable to employ religion for the purpose of aggression towards the rights of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>50</sup>

In his keynote lecture at the Marrakesh Declaration conference, leading Sunni Muslim theologian Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah argued that the Muslim world needed a modern equivalent of the Medina Charter. He listed 11 universal Quranic principles on which this should be based, all of which appear in the Medina Charter:

1. kindness
2. human dignity
3. cooperation in goodness, mutual guarantee and righting wrongs
4. reconciliation
5. human fraternity and mutual recognition
6. wisdom
7. welfare
8. justice in dealing with people
9. mercy and compassion
10. peace
11. loyalty to covenants and agreements<sup>51</sup>

These principles became the basic tenets of the Marrakesh Declaration. They show how, for leading Islamic theologians, Islamic prophetic examples such as the Medina Charter are relevant to the modern world only through universal principles, not via a fundamentalist attempt to reproduce detail that is a hallmark of Islamist regimes such as those of Iran and the Taliban. These principles also open up room for shared values with other religions and philosophies, since the principles are not specifically Islamic.

### Questions About the Authenticity of a Covenant Attributed to Caliph Omar

As might be expected during a three-day international gathering involving hundreds of religious scholars, the Marrakesh Declaration conference saw vigorous and important debates. These included discussions of the authenticity and accuracy of a seventh-century covenant with Syrian Christians attributed to Caliph Omar, the second caliph of Islam.

This covenant included almost 30 clauses that placed severe restrictions on Christians living under Muslim rule.<sup>52</sup> This discrimination would seem to contradict key Islamic principles of mercy and justice.

The jurists at the 2016 conference presented possible explanations to resolve this dichotomy.<sup>53</sup> First, the covenant was in fact made by Caliph Omar II, not Omar I, thus reducing its authority: although Omar II is highly regarded in Sunni Islam, Omar I's status is incomparably higher. Second, the covenant is not authentic: it is mentioned only by later historians, not by earlier ones.<sup>54</sup>

### Building and Maintaining Non-Muslim Places of Worship in Muslim Societies

The debates about the alleged Covenant of Omar were significant because the document prohibited the building of new churches or monasteries and the repair of existing ones. In another step to discredit the covenant, in December 2016, after a terrorist attack on a Coptic cathedral in Cairo killed at least 25 people, the sheikh of Al-Azhar issued a decree requiring all Friday imams in Egypt to state in their next sermons that “the sanctity of churches is exactly the same as the sanctity of mosques”.<sup>55</sup>

The sheikh reiterated this message at the inauguration of a major Coptic cathedral in 2019. He said that there was a clear Quranic instruction to allow the building and maintenance of non-Muslim places of worship, even though this was often overlooked even by specialist scholars. The sheikh referred to the following Quranic passage:

*“Permission has been granted to those who have been attacked (to fight back), for they have been wronged: truly, God is certainly able to help them. Those who were expelled from their homes unjustly, (for no other reason) except that they say: Our Lord is God. Were it not for God preventing some people by means of others, there would certainly be destroyed: monasteries, synagogues, churches and mosques, in which God’s name is remembered much.”*<sup>56</sup>

The medieval controversy about non-Muslim places of worship in Muslim societies – especially in the Arabian Peninsula, which has long been regarded as the heartland of Islam – continues today. For example, a Saudi jurist argued strongly in 2009 that non-Muslim places of worship must not be allowed in Muslim societies, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>57</sup> However, an official, detailed fatwa by the grand mufti of Egypt in 2017 vehemently supported the building and maintenance of churches and other non-Muslim places of worship in “Islamic states”.<sup>58</sup> This fatwa was partly in response to the building and official recognition of previously unofficial non-Muslim places of worship in the Arabian Peninsula.

In 2010, there was controversy over the proposed building of a new church in Kuwait, part of the Arabian Peninsula. A government proposal to build a church for the 200,000 Catholics in Kuwait split the local council and community, sparking heated debates.<sup>59</sup>

In the UAE, there were over 40 churches, a Sikh gurdwara, two Hindu shrines and a synagogue as of 2019, and the country's first Hindu temple was licensed to be built. These developments are all based on the UAE's constitution, which upholds religious freedom.<sup>60</sup>

In Pakistan, a controversy surrounded the government's announcement in 2020 that it would support the construction of the country's first new Hindu temple and crematorium since independence in 1947. A total of £500,000 (\$695,000) of state funds and land was allocated to the project in Islamabad.<sup>61</sup> After objections from some Islamic clerics, the matter was referred to the country's official authoritative Muslim body, the Council for Islamic Ideology. The council ruled that there was no Islamic or constitutional objection to the building of the temple and crematorium.<sup>62</sup>

### The Improving Treatment of Christians in Pakistan

Another important aspect of religious freedom is the treatment of non-Muslim minorities, an issue on which Pakistan offers some important lessons. The government of Prime Minister Imran Khan began improving the rights of religious minorities immediately after his election in 2017. Over the next two years, the government of Punjab, the country's most populous and influential province, improved minority rights in the areas of education, religious instruction, employment, prison rehabilitation, protection from hate speech and religious tourism.<sup>63</sup>

Although issues to do with freedom of religion and belief remain problematic in the Muslim world, there are grounds for optimism.

Another major development in Pakistan was the 2019 release of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death in 2010, after a 2018 Supreme Court judgment based on Islamic arguments overturned her conviction.<sup>64</sup>

All in all, although issues to do with freedom of religion and belief remain problematic in the Muslim world, there are grounds for optimism. The Marrakesh Declaration on the rights of non-Muslim minorities in Muslim-majority countries and the increasing state support for non-Muslim places of worship in Kuwait, Pakistan and the UAE are all steps in the right direction.

## SHARIA AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Beyond the treatment of religious minorities, the rights of women in Muslim-majority states are another touchstone in efforts to confront Islamist misinterpretations of the sharia. Several countries in the Muslim world, from Morocco to Tunisia to Saudi Arabia, have made notable advances in this area in recent years.

### Reforms to Muslim Family Law in Morocco

In 2004, a set of reforms in Morocco increased gender equality in marriage and restricted the practice of polygamy.<sup>65</sup> The reforms, backed by the king, came about after pressure from activists, especially women, due to children's and women's rights being threatened. Divisions in Moroccan society over these issues were reflected in the panel set up to devise the reforms, which included female Islamic scholars.<sup>66</sup> The reforms were called the New Mudawwana because the previous laws had been based closely on the original Mudawwana, an eighth-century compilation of Islamic jurisprudence.

Before the 2004 reforms, married women in Morocco had to be obedient to their husbands in return for maintenance. Women had no right to divorce except through court proceedings, whereas men had a unilateral right to divorce. The New Mudawwana greatly advanced Muslim women's rights in Morocco. The reforms also represent a prime example of the need to update medieval understandings of Islam, such as the eighth-century Mudawwana code of family law, according to modern realities.

### Marriage and Inheritance Reforms in Tunisia

In nearby Tunisia, on the country's National Women's Day in 2017, then President Beji Caid Essebsi announced that his government would reverse a 1973 law to allow Tunisian women to marry non-Muslim men and give women equal inheritance rights to men.<sup>67</sup> Both proposals were condemned by Islamist groups but supported by the grand mufti of Tunisia.<sup>68</sup> Essebsi's death in 2019 may have delayed these developments, however.

Equal inheritance for women continues to be highly contested in the Muslim world. In 2010, the OIC's IIFA issued a six-page fatwa insisting that traditional Islamic inheritance rules were immutable.<sup>69</sup> In addition to Tunisia, there have been national campaigns in recent years for gender equality in inheritance in several other Muslim-majority countries, including Morocco and Pakistan.

### Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia

In 2018, Saudi Arabia finally allowed women to drive, becoming the last country in the world to do so. In August 2019, a few months after the Mecca Charter had promoted women's empowerment and equality of opportunity, Saudi Arabia also lifted many of the restrictions on women that had prevented them from exercising certain rights, such as work, travel and the ability to register births and deaths, without the permission of a male guardian.<sup>70</sup> In July 2021, on the occasion of the annual hajj, it was reported that women could now go to Mecca on pilgrimage without a male chaperone.<sup>71</sup>

The previous restrictions on women in Saudi Arabia had been supported by medieval fatwas; the ban on driving was based on a modern Saudi fatwa that feared the free movement of women would lead to sexual promiscuity. However, the classical Islamic tradition is rich and diverse, and the recent reforms also have a basis in medieval jurisprudence. For example, the Quran speaks of groups of women travelling together, and a famous Hadith – a saying of the Prophet Muhammad – predicted that travel within Arabia would become so safe that a woman could cross the peninsula by herself. These texts were the basis of classical Islamic fatwas that allowed groups of women to travel without male chaperones.

The recent social reforms in Saudi Arabia, promoted by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, have resulted from years of societal pressure from Saudi women as well as religious jurisprudential deliberations among Saudi scholars. The country's feared religious police were also reformed in 2016 into an institution with more moderate leadership and more of an advisory, rather than a disciplinary, role.<sup>72</sup>

### The 2020 Arab Youth Survey

One of the top ten findings of the 2020 Arab Youth Survey was to do with gender rights: many young Arab women felt that they had the same rights as men. Arab youth, both men and women, also reported that religion was the most important aspect of their identity – more so than family or nationality.<sup>73</sup> These findings, based on polling of 4,000 young men and women with an equal gender split across 17 Arab states, add confidence that

theological declarations of gender equality, including those by Al-Azhar, the Mecca Charter and the New Alliance of Virtue, are consistent with feelings and trends on the ground.

## HUDOOD REFORMS

In classical Islamic jurisprudence, the hudood (or *hudūd*) refers to the Islamic penal code, including corporal and capital punishment. In the latter category are flogging, amputations, crucifixion, stoning to death and other forms of execution. All of these practices were based on literalist readings of the Quran and Hadith texts.

The Ottoman Tanzimat reforms of the mid-19th century, passed by the Ottoman caliph and sultan with the backing of their senior sharia scholars, including the grand mufti, repealed these classical *hudood* punishments. However, 20th-century Islamist movements vociferously called for the reintroduction of the *hudood*, because Islamists' fundamentalist logic meant that God would bless Muslims with victory only if they applied the sharia in its totality.

**Islamists' fundamentalist logic meant that God would bless Muslims with victory only if they applied sharia in its totality.**

Thus, the *hudood* was implemented widely in Saudi Arabia, in Khomeinist Iran, in some of the Muslim-majority states of northern Nigeria and in Afghanistan by the Taliban. In 1979, Pakistan introduced harsh *Hudood* Ordinances as part of its Islamisation programme, including measures that disproportionately affected women: rape victims who could not prove the crime were judged guilty of fornication or adultery and could therefore be flogged or stoned to death.

The most extreme reintroduction of the medieval *hudood* has been by ISIS, which implemented all such practices, including crucifixion. The group also used the principle of discretionary punishments, or *tazir*, to justify the burning alive of a Jordanian fighter pilot and the drowning of women convicted of sexual offences by ISIS courts. In 2017, 21 nonstate Islamist groups in 15 countries around the world executed nearly 2,000 people using the justification of implementing the *hudood*. ISIS carried out over 1,500 of these executions.<sup>74</sup>

The past two decades have also seen some progress, however. In 2006, Pakistan passed the Women's Protection Bill, which reversed many of the excesses of the 1979 *Hudood* Ordinances. Ten years later, the Pakistani government amended the country's law on rape to introduce harsher punishments for perpetrators of rape and honour killing, a move welcomed by the then director of UN Women.<sup>75</sup> And in 2020, Saudi Arabia abolished the use of flogging in discretionary punishment.

Intellectually, since the 20th century, many leading Muslim thinkers, including Egyptian Grand Mufti Shawki Allam, have refuted Islamist calls for the *hudood* to be revived, arguing that these practices are obsolete and should be replaced with modern penal codes. The grand mufti of the UAE, Abdullah bin Bayyah, commented in 2011 that "international treaties have made the implementation of the *hudood* difficult". Bin Bayyah has previously insisted that Muslims uphold international agreements, as this is required by the basic Islamic obligation of keeping promises.<sup>76</sup>



## Jihad: Struggle and Holy War

Over the past two decades, the many authoritative fatwas against terrorism carried out in the name of the sacred Islamic concept of jihad have had a broad range and reach. That is despite the intimidation, violence and murder experienced by those clerics who speak out against terrorism.

Such fatwas tend to contextualise well the jurisprudential aspects of jihad. The language of jihad is used not only by terrorist groups but also by some Muslim militaries. Pakistan, as an Islamic republic, has used the language of jihad for decades to motivate its armed forces, the vast majority of whose members are Muslims. The official Urdu army song *Allahu Akbar* (God is Greatest) includes the following lyrics:

*What fear of death does a warrior have?  
Giving your life is the greatest jihad:  
The Quran has spoken this.  
O mujahid [jihad fighter] man, wake up:  
The time for martyrdom has come!*<sup>77</sup>

When thousands of young Saudis departed for Afghanistan after 9/11 to fight for al-Qaeda, the Saudi government cleverly wrestled back the narrative of jihad. Riyadh renamed its military police the Mujahideen to rebut the claim that al-Qaeda fighters were the real mujahideen, or jihad fighters. Whether by accident or design, there has been a prominent checkpoint of these anti-al-Qaeda Mujahideen on the Jeddah–Mecca highway since just after 9/11. The Saudi military police has thus been advertising its existence to hundreds of millions of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca over the past two decades.<sup>78</sup> This and other factors helped Saudi Arabia psychologically defeat al-Qaeda’s terrorist campaign in the kingdom in the 2000s.<sup>79</sup>

In 2020, Turkey’s government released a video presenting the country’s armed forces as the heir to the militaries of Turkish states stretching back a millennium, including the Ottoman Empire and the 11th- and 12th-century Seljuk Empire. The video depicted historical Turkish figures entering Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia Mosque to pray, accompanied by Turkish President Recep

Tayyip Erdoğan reciting the Quranic chapter *Surah Al-Fath* (Conquest). Islamic holy sites including Mecca were also shown in the video, which closed with images of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.<sup>80</sup> Such an ending implies that the Turkish armed forces are ready to ‘liberate’ Jerusalem from Israeli rule and mirrors a propaganda tactic of Islamist militias such as Somalia’s al-Shabab, ISIS and the Quds (Jerusalem) Force, part of Iran’s IRGC.

Thus, jihad is contested between Islamist terrorist groups and Muslim militaries. Elucidation and elaboration of the nature of military jihad in the modern world will continue to be very important if mainstream Islam is to win the ideological battle against Islamist violent extremism.



## Islamic Reform and Modernisation: Education and Science

Modernisation efforts in the Muslim world must engage with modern science and technology, which have been major factors in globalisation and rapid social change over the past few centuries. Several developments in this regard are worth noting.

### MUSLIM INITIATIVES ON SCIENCE

From 2013 to 2016, the Muslim World Science Initiative organised two major intellectual task forces to address important issues involving Islam, the Muslim world and science. Each involved about a dozen Muslim scientists, researchers and theologians and resulted in a lengthy report summarising the respective task force's discussions and findings.

The İhsanoğlu Task Force on Islam and Science, which discussed both pro- and anti-science medieval Islamic theology, culminated in the Istanbul Declaration on Islam and Science, which aimed at fostering further reconciliation of the Muslim world with modern science. The declaration included the following paragraphs:

*“Muslims must celebrate the diversity of approaches and perspectives on Islam and science with the tradition of humility, tolerance, and respect toward other views (Muslim and non-Muslim).*

*Muslim science teachers should train their students to develop a rational methodology of examining the natural world around them and to think critically and independently.*

*The creation of a truly productive scientific environment requires ‘freedom of thought’ and expression as well as opportunities for critical inquiry, questioning of authority, and celebration of doubt.*

*Muslims should fully engage with science and with its wider implications in technology, philosophy, theology, society and morality.”<sup>81</sup>*

Meanwhile, the Zakri Task Force on Science at the Universities of the Muslim World included the following recommendations for universities and authorities such as governments:

- Academic institutions should rethink science curricula at universities – that is, what should be taught and how.
- The relevant authorities should transform universities into meritocracies by hiring, incentivising and empowering.
- Universities should revive their social contract with society through greater relevance and service.
- Authorities should support a university culture of accountability, evaluation and best practice.
- Governments should enhance the national profile of sciences and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) careers.
- Universities should enhance the representation of minorities in STEM subjects.<sup>82</sup>

These two task forces show that leaders in the Muslim world, including academics and politicians, have recognised the need for comprehensive Muslim intellectual engagement, via academic institutions, with the modern world as part of the struggle for the modernisation of Islam. These task forces addressed foundational, theological challenges and offered practical, policy-based recommendations for science and technology in the Muslim world. Thus, they represent important steps towards the theoretical and practical resolution of barriers to the Muslim world's modernisation.

## THE ISLAMIC DECLARATION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The 2015 Islamic Declaration on Climate Change was another welcome development that confirmed the Muslim world's increasing engagement with modernity and global issues in an inclusive way, rather than through separatist Islamist approaches.<sup>83</sup> In the declaration, Muslim faith leaders, senior international development policymakers, academics and other experts called on the world's Muslims, who numbered about 1.6 billion at the time, to play an active role in combating climate change. The declaration was issued at the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium in Istanbul.<sup>84</sup> The IIFA's 2009 resolution on environmental matters may be seen as a precursor to this development.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

In the two decades since 9/11, the Islamist-dominated, fundamentalist Muslim discourse of the 20th century has slowly shown signs of being replaced by a 21st-century Muslim narrative that is more open to the world and to other religions and philosophies.

The actions of Islamist terrorist groups in Muslim-majority countries have provoked intense, intra-Muslim debates about interpretations of Islam. The Taliban are extremely divisive in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as are al-Qaeda and ISIS around the Muslim world. Al-Shabab in East Africa and Boko Haram in West Africa are similarly polarising influences.

When the 9/11 attacks happened, the Taliban, who harboured and were allied with al-Qaeda, were recognised by only three countries as the legitimate government of Afghanistan: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. (All three countries quickly retracted their recognition of the Taliban after 9/11). Twenty years later, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are sponsoring unprecedented reform in the Muslim world through their religious ministries. While Pakistan's record is somewhat mixed, it has certainly made important strides in its treatment of religious minorities.

A striking example of these developments is the Muslim World League, which in the 1980s was issuing fatwas to support armed jihads around the world. In 2019, the league issued the Mecca Charter, which called for global dialogue based on human equality and the rejection of religious supremacy.

The contested nature of these debates in the Muslim world is exemplified by the OIC and its Islamic jurisprudential arm, the IIFA, both of which give mixed messages. The IIFA still employs Islamist language extensively, speaking of OIC countries as "Islamic states" and regularly using the term "umma" to denote the world's 2 billion Muslims as a single, united, political-religious body – even though this is evidently not the case – and emphasising the importance of Muslim governments in implementing the sharia. As recently as 2015, the IIFA asserted that a woman could not

be a head of state, although populous Muslim-majority countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey have had female leaders in the past few decades.

More recently, however, the IIFA has emphasised peaceful co-existence among the world's nation-states, with resolutions in 2019 entitled "The Declaration of Generous Co-existence in the Shadow of Islam" and "The Role of Religious Education in Promoting Peace".<sup>86</sup> And despite the OIC's history of Islamist-inspired messaging, its recent sidelining of its own Cairo Declaration shows that matters of human rights are still contested in the world of Islam. Furthermore, the IIFA, despite ten major confrontational declarations since 1985 on Jerusalem and Palestine, has repeatedly stated that international relations are based on the principle of peace.

With a newly victorious Taliban in Afghanistan, an entrenched Khomeinist regime in Iran and al-Qaeda- and ISIS-affiliated groups around the Muslim world, the struggle between fundamentalist Islamists and progressive Muslim voices will continue over the next few decades. The main arenas of contested debate will be human rights, especially those of women and religious minorities, and the place of Islam or the sharia in society.

Crucially, the terms of the debate have changed: Islamists can no longer assume that the debate will be conducted according to their exclusivist principles, because these are no longer accepted axiomatically. The Muslim world also includes increasingly empowered universalist and inclusive voices, eager to make peace with the rest of the world and join forces in a collective effort to face global challenges such as pandemics and climate change.

Countries like Pakistan and the UAE have made significant strides forward in their treatment of religious minorities. The 2016 Marrakesh Declaration on the rights of non-Muslims in Muslim-majority states has elevated this issue in international Muslim policy circles. Meanwhile, women's rights continue to be contested around the Muslim world, but the past two decades have seen significant improvements in Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the UAE.

Governments, policymakers and decision-makers should take note of the intense ongoing debates in the Muslim world. They should enable and support those voices and forces that are more open, inclusive and universalist with respect to the rest of the world. Such forces are more likely to be durable allies in a shared, equitable future for humanity.

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## About the Author

Usama Hasan specialises in developing Islamic theological critique of, and alternatives to, Islamist extremism. His focus areas include developing policy and programmatic interventions to support deradicalisation efforts in the UK and internationally. He also specialises in Islamic approaches to religion-state relationships.

A published author on Islamic and interfaith issues and a regular contributor to national and international media, Usama is also a practising imam and a member of Against Violent Extremism and of the UK Counter-Terrorism Advisory Network. He is also a fellow of the UK's Royal Astronomical Society and a member of the International Society for Science and Religion.

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