

Islamic Extremism in the Context of Globalism

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[Opening du'ā]

Before we begin, I want to express my thanks to the excellent authorities of this mosque for their very generous permission to allow our sisters who are with us to sit here at our side, and I want to ask all of our brothers to observe correct etiquette.



Our topic tonight is extremism in a global context. I'm not sure if we'll get there, it's a big topic. Technically speaking, this is a lecture – but I'm not here to lecture you. I'm not here to tell you what is what. I'm here for us to look at this phenomenon and if time permits, to discuss it. Because this is the issue of the time, isn't it? This is what we read in the newspapers, this is what we hear about so this is an important topic, it's a very difficult topic, and it's a very complicated topic.

How many of you have heard of Walt Disney? Everybody. Amazing. So what we wanted to begin with is getting beyond pure Walt Disney. And much of what is said about terrorism and extremism is pure Walt Disney, it has nothing to do with reality. And when we look at this phenomenon we have to look at it honestly. We have to look at it from all perspectives. And we have to look at the parts that are ugly, and we have to look at the parts that drive people to do these things, and only when we begin to talk about things honestly, can we arrive at a solution, in my opinion.

What do you think of when you think of the word extremism? That's a rhetorical question...I like to ask questions and answer myself [Dr. AbdAllah laughs], but when I think of extremism as a Muslim, I think – and possibly you're the same – of the Middle Way – which is the way of the Prophet (saw) – is it not? Which is Al-Sirāt Al-Mustaqīm, ummatan wasat- the Middle Nation. God made us a moderate nation – did he not? He made us ummatun wasat. So that we could be, what? Shuhadā' 'alā Al-Nās, so that we could bear witness over mankind. Human kind. And so that the Prophet (saw) could bear witness over us. And that's what we are, that's what we have been and that's what we will be. We are ummatan wasat.

So when we talk about extremism, we're talking about something that is not in the middle. It's at the extreme – this extreme or that extreme – and from our perspective it's wrong because Islām is in the middle. Islām is just. We hear this word in the press all the time, so sometimes I ask myself, but what does the other side mean when they use that word? In other words if I think of extremism and I imagine the middle way – which applies to me as a Muslim and to you – then it may be that other people use the word and they think of something else, such as 'you are extreme and I am not, that you are incorrect and I am not, that you are guilty and I am not, that the burden is on you and it's not on me.' And if that's what is meant by extremism, then I think that's very different for all of us to accept. So when we look at this issue, we do have to look at it honestly, objectively and we also have to define terms. Any time that someone uses a term with regard to us or themselves, let us know what that term actually means – what do you understand by that and what do I.

As you know jihād is a part of our religion and jihād has rules of engagement and jihād is noble. And jihād is a million things. It can be battle – with rules of engagement – for a just cause; it can be a woman delivering in pregnancy, jihād means at its root, three things – that it's difficult, and you have to exert yourself and it means that the object is good, the goal is good, the thing that you want is worth striving for. And of course one way to do that (in certain situations) is to struggle. And no Muslim derives that - that's something very obvious. But there are rules of engagement. There are certain things that we do not do, that we cannot do, by the law. And the kind of terrorism that we have seen – radical terrorism that we have seen – in recent decades- is unknown in the history of our Ummah. This is something very recent. We don't have that parallel in the past and you could even say that most of it began in 1983 and after that. And the inspiration for a lot of that radical terrorism doesn't come from Islām. It comes from leftist ideology. It is leftist techniques.

Now what we want to talk about is what drives people to do those kinds of things. It's not enough to just say 'that's wrong and it shouldn't be done.' It's also necessary for us to consider what drives people to these limits. What makes this happen? And as the brother said, we have a long history, an ancient legacy, and we have seen much worse in the past. We have seen much worse. But you might agree that in the past we had greater self confidence, maybe we had greater faith. Maybe we were able to confront the situations that were before us, in a wiser way. But we've seen our history is a long history. And we are a patient people and we are people that have to adhere to the way of the Prophet (saw).

Islām is historically the middle way. We have seen extremes in our history, but always we came back to the Middle way. It's like the gyroscope of Islām: we may go a little bit this way, we may go a little bit that way but the situation corrects itself and ultimately we come back. So as we continue to talk about this subject, I think something that is very important, to be honest about this subject, is that extremism never occurs in a vacuum. This is something we have to be very clear about. And all of that, I would say, is getting beyond Walt Disney.

Another thing to be very clear about is that Muslims are not generally extremists. The vast majority of Muslims are people of the Middle Way. They have always been that way - they will always continue to be that way, and we're not the only extremists in the world. There are Jewish extremists. No question about that. There are Christian extremists. No question about that. There are Hindu extremists and there are even secular extremists, and you can identify these groups.

So one of the things we see when we talk about extremism in a global context is that everybody has a share of that pie. Although we suffer from that problem – and we will do something about that problem – we must after understanding the nature of the problem. It's certainly not uniquely ours.

Another thing that is very important about extremism – and this is part of the way of getting away from pure Walt Disney – is that it is not intrinsic to Islām. In fact in my point of view, Islām per say is irrelevant, Islām per say is irrelevant. It's not as if this is a natural outgrowth of our religion – it's not. In fact this is an aberration in the context of our religion.

But we have to understand the nature of that. If we look at Jewish extremism, Christian extremism, Hindu extremism, Secularist extremism and Muslim extremism, we will see that they have certain things in common.

First of all, they tend to see the world in black and white. There are no distinctions, there's no grey. It's all this or all that. The world is a dichotomy – there are the good people and there are the bad, as our President said 'the evil ones and the good ones' - which is an extremist idea. It sees the world in black and white and that's unjust, it's incorrect. It's very important for us to draw distinctions. It's very important for us to avoid racist generalisations – we need to distinguish as our Prophet taught us (saw) between those who are good, those who are bad; those who are evil and those who are not; those who befriend us and those who do not.

The world is not black and white.

Another thing about the extremist groups – Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Secularist, Hindu – is that there is very strong allegiance to the group itself, with usually antipathy to the other. This is actually part of that black-white phenomenon. So, 'my group is right and everything else is wrong. If you're in my group you're right, and if you're not in my group, you're wrong.' And again we see this amongst some of our community, and you'll see it among the extremist groups in all the camps. In a global context one of the interesting things about extremism in all the camps is that it tends to be anti-intellectual and tends to be anti-traditional, even for us and for Christians and for others it tends to be anti-theological. In other words it's not interested in the tradition as such. It's not interested in the classical tradition as much. It wants a quick fix and it focuses on particular issues, it doesn't go into great depth. Often in extremist groups there is spirituality. If there were not spirituality they would not be able to continue. They wouldn't be able to hold together. But that spirituality is a direct, personal spirituality, which comes from association with the group, and the empowerment that comes from the group. In other words, again it's not a traditional

theologically based spirituality. For us, it's not a traditional type of spirituality. Extremist groups tend to shift from religion per se to religious commitment. Does that make sense? In other words, it's not like the traditional way of imbibing the tradition, believing in the tradition, taking on the tradition, but the issue becomes commitment and usually commitment to a cause.

Although this is not necessarily wrong depending on the cause, it can be very harmful because that cause can become everything. That cause can almost become like an idol – a fixation. And in that context, religion often becomes your identity. Not just your belief, not just your practice, but my identity. As opposed to the others who don't have that identity. And often in a global context it gives me an identity in a faceless world.

So if a person is alienated, if a person has no meaning in their life, if you live maybe in the slums of Paris, then this gives me identity in a faceless world. My religion becomes my identity, and of course religion must be much deeper than that. And again this is not just true of us; this is true of the extremist wherever you find the extremist. Whether they're a fascist or Leninist, a racist, European racist, an American racist, right wing, whatever they might be.

Extremism often expresses itself in a personal quest for immediately accessible knowledge. In other words pamphlets – we read pamphlets, we read easy books, immediately accessible knowledge. Maybe tapes, CDs, not careful study, not in depth study. And often this is in defiance of authority and what I mean by that is defiance of traditional authority – of schools, the traditions, the teachers.

As one of the great Hadith scholars I knew in Morocco used to say, 'I studied Hadith all my life. I studied Islām all my life and a young man who doesn't even pray, goes into the movie theatre, comes out, buys a pamphlet and the next day he's calling me a kāfir.' So this is an example of the quick fix – in other words – immediately accessible knowledge and then defiance of authority. That you, who have studied Islām all your life – and your grandfather studied it, and his, I can condemn you in five minutes because I read this pamphlet and I can see that what you're doing doesn't suit.

And again, we're not just talking about ourselves; this is typical of extremism wherever you find it. So therefore the religiosity in extremism is often personal experience as I said before and not legacy. It's not legacy.

How does extremism relate to tradition? Well, you can look at American right-wing evangelicals and see how that works.

And you can look at Jewish extremists and see how that works. Selective retrieval of the past. Selective retrieval. In other words to go back into the Islāmic tradition,

which is rich, beautiful, life-giving and which is the middle-way, and then just take the bits and pieces that justify what I want – the pre-occupation that I have.

And in Islām, in this great tradition that we have, these great scholars of the past and the present, whenever you take a bit or a piece, and you focus on it only, what do we call that? Sectarianism. That's *firqah*. And this was the nature of the *khawārij* - that they take just one part of the Prophetic Legacy, they insist upon it, and then they go outside of it. And there were others that did the same. But the extremists tend to do that.

Extremism is a sickness, and it's very important that we protect ourselves from that. We've got work to do; we've got a community to build. We want justice, we want things to be right, but if we don't follow the footsteps of the *mustafā* – the chosen one – do you think we'll get there? I don't think so, we have to follow his path don't we. We have to respect his teaching, his great legacy.

And you'll find in the extremist the contention that we are returning to the true tenants of religion. And look at the extremists. Look at the Jewish settlers in the West Bank and see what they say. They are the true Jews, they are the ones who are following the Torah - they are the ones who believe that no matter what other Rabbi's may say. Look at the Christian evangelicals in the US – it's their way or no way. They have the true tenants, and if we look at our own count, we will also see that we have people among us. 'This is the true way – this pamphlet I have with me – this newspaper that I read – this CD that I listened to.' And this is another common characteristic.

There are also other qualities – a-historical view of the past, deep sense of immediate crisis. Do you feel that way? Do you feel there is a crisis right now? Do you? I do. And if I didn't, I think I'd be crazy. Yes of course, we have immediate crises, not one, we have a thousand. But extremism focuses on that immediate sense of crisis. And it's like they can't let go of it; you've got to step back and have sound leadership, and you have to be wise, and we have to go about things in the proper way. We live in a very complex world and many of us are filled with anger.

I know when I saw Lebanon blown off the face of the map that I was filled with anger as you were. Who was it who has any sense? Who was it who has any decency? But the Prophet said '*lā taghdab, lā taghdab, lā taghdab,*' don't lose your temper, don't be angry, don't be angry.'

That's Prophetic wisdom, anger does nothing right? Anger is from whom? *Shaytān*. Control yourself. The Prophet (*saw*) when he was in the worst of situations, like the battle of the trench, when it looked like the Muslims were going to be exterminated - was he angry? Was his face red with anger? He was '*ahlam ma yukūn*' he was completely *halīm*, completely at peace, completely in control. And this is mastery – that is the way of the Prophets.

The Chinese are a very intelligent, very brilliant people. There is a very popular little

booklet amongst people – even in business – called the Art of War by Tsun Su – brilliant. What does he say about anger? He said if you fight your enemy and you know he is angry, or quick to anger, you have defeated him from the start. Anger is defeat. You can never approach your problems from anger, unless you want to be defeated.

You must obey the Prophet (saw). Use your intellect. Follow the way, get rid of your anger, take refuge in your Creator, and believe in our creator.

The deep sense of immediate crisis which often leads to extreme action, actions that defeat the purpose, that make the anger greater.

Often extremist groups have a problem with modernity. Evangelicals in America are like that. But they use technology and use it in a very sophisticated way. So it's strange isn't it – they may have an issue with the modern way, but they use technology.

Now, I believe that there are three things that we must consider, especially to talk about extremism, especially in our house, especially among our people:

The first is issues and grievances – what is it that bothers us? This comes first because extremism is not natural. Muslims are peaceful people, Muslims are people of the middle way, and if you look at war and violence over the last 400 years, who are the people who have perpetuated the vast majority of wars? Muslims? No. Europeans and North Americans. The most destructive wars of all, the most violent wars of all.

So we begin to behave in a way such as some of us today...what's happened?

I've been a Muslim for 36 years. Some of you weren't around in 1970; some of you old grey beards were, like me. But when I became a Muslim in 1970, no one knew what Islām was, and nobody cared. It was as if Islām was dead. Then Islām began to come to the forefront, and there were reasons for this – some good, some bad – and that's also why if you're going to talk about a sick man – and extremism is like a sick person from the description I have given – then we're like a doctor. We have to see – what is the problem? How did you develop this heart condition? Why do you have high blood pressure? Why is your cholesterol like this? There are reasons for that, so we have to look at those reasons.

The next thing we have to look at is social psychology, in other words, what happens to our minds when we see things that are very difficult to take. We can't ignore that. Again, when I see Lebanon blown off the face of the map, something happens to me and all of us. And you see people who are actually very moderate and all of a sudden, they're not moderate anymore. We can't ignore that, and it's funny because we as Muslims tend not to forget things very well. We do have memories. It's strange that as soon as Lebanon being blown off the face of the map was off the front page, the American people forgot about it, and Europeans, I don't know, but I don't think most of them care about it.

The problem is we don't forget.

I remember when the Bosnia matters were taking place – and you remember that – it virtually drove me out of my mind. And most people have forgotten about it. So this is also part of the reality. We talk about this all the time, but it is a valid issue and we do have to talk about this and our neighbours around us, they have to be honest about this too. It takes two to tango; if you want me to be honest with you, you have to be honest with me. We need to talk about these things in an honest way – not with hegemonic discourse. That's a big word, but one I like very much.

Hegemonic discourse is when I can't say 'why'. For example, if you take the case of Israel and the way it was established, the way that foreign policies here supported it, the constant violations of human rights and international law – why can't we talk about that? And if I can't talk about it – that's hegemonic discourse. We can't have that; we need to have free, open meetings. In a nice friendly way – but there's no statute of limitations which is, if I do something, I have approximately five years to take you to court and if I don't take you to court within five years, I can't take you to court after that.

But when it comes to victims of oppression – peoples, whose lands were taken away, without their will, people who were tortured, killed or massacred, like the Bosnians and others. There is no statute of limitations – it's not like after five years you can't talk about that. And again, whatever the world community may or may not feel, if they really care about Muslims, and they really want to solve these problems then we must talk about the whole situation – we can't put it under the table; that will never work.

There is a great Christian Scholar in Chicago called Reinhold Newborough talked about love – about Christian love – he was a great Christian theologian. He said that 'love is indeed an attribute of Christ. Jesus came to teach love, but there can be no love without justice; there must be justice, there must be an agreement, there must be a solution and whatever anybody says, if we're not honest about this, then we're talking pure Walt Disney, and nothing will come of it except for mere difficulty.

Something that's not part of it is modernisation. Modernisation is not part of the problem. Muslims have been fully modernised since World War Two. And many Muslim countries waver for that. So the idea that Muslims aren't modernised? What are you talking about? We don't ride camels. Every Muslim country has been modernised since World War Two. We have mass education, we have mass readership, mass media. The problem is not that we don't accept democracy. There have been studies – Zogby polls and others – that have asked Muslims, even radical Muslims – what they think about democracy, and more radical Muslims want democracy than right-wing Christians in the U.S. so that's not an issue.

The vast majority of the Muslim World wants democracy. They want freedom, they want to be able to vote, and they want to have a part in the government of their countries.

And of course there's also the problem that there are problems on the outside. There are issues on the inside. It's a fact admitted by scholars who study the Muslim world, that the authoritarian regimes of the Muslim world, that brutally mistreat their people, are a major factor in extremism, and in fact, as great scholars have shown, like Jill Chappell and Olivier. To the extent that the region is authoritarian and aggressive, you will find that the extremist movements are more and more radical; there's a direct relationship, to the extent that the more the regime is authoritarian and oppressive, you will find the extremists are more and more radical. It's a direct relationship.

So just as we look at grievances on the outside, it's perfectly valid and absolutely necessary to look at the tyranny of many Muslim states and this is something that breeds an extremism of the most viscous type.

Now, there's something we have to be very honest about – the fact that we also have problems that we are responsible for. And this is a place that I believe we have to begin. You know how our communities are, most of you know how the Muslim world is, and its true there are many ways to explain the problems of the Muslim World – but how are we in our families? How are we in our communities? How do we treat our children? How do we treat each other? How do we treat our wives? Are we just? Are we fair? Because we will be judged by this, and this again is why we must be

honest about everything. We can't just point to the other, there is a problem there and we will talk about it and look at it. But there's also a problem in me. There's also problem in the way I treat my children, myself, my wife. And this we must deal with immediately. We must make our communities, communities of justice, and fairness, and honesty and transparency. That is our obligation before our Lord.

And what success can I expect if I don't clean my own house? We have so many problems, so many issues, grievances that we could go on and on and on – but we also have a problem in our own house. You know the details – I don't know your community. You're good people; I'm very honoured to be with you.

I know my community in Chicago. I know a lot of things I don't want to mention to you because it wouldn't be right for my people. I know a lot of things I would be embarrassed to speak about, and most of us have things like this. So it's very important for us to look at ourselves and to clean our own house and set our own house in order.

Sometimes when we look at the other problems only, then it becomes escapism, i.e. it's running away from responsibility. We must face up to the responsibility and this is why I like very much what the brother said.

When I came into Islām in 1970, I would go to these annual Muslim gatherings, like the ISNA convention you have today, in those days it was MSA. Today we have 7million Muslims in the US. In 1970 we didn't have 120,000. Isn't that amazing? Today in Chicago, we have 350,000. That's amazing. We used to go to our MSA conventions. Today in SNA you have thousands of people there. In those days we'd have a couple of hundred. We'd be so happy – it was beautiful for me. I remember those conferences – I was a new Muslim, I prayed next to my Muslim brothers and sisters. I saw a brother from Indonesia who was like a Saint. I saw another one from Egypt – I just loved him so much; he was an incredible man. His name was Al-Assāl – the honey salesman- he was beautiful.

You know what we used to talk about at those conferences? That 'Allah does not alter the condition of a peoples until they alter the condition themselves' [Sūrat Al-Ra'd (The Thunder) Verse 11]. That was the verse that was always on the wall and on the big banner. Everybody talked about it – even in those days, like the suffering of the Palestinian people. We talked about that. But we always came back to – 'we must change ourselves.' And that is the Qur'ānic imperative: look at yourself. As 'Omar used to say 'hāsibū anfusikum qabla an tuhāsibu' – take yourselves to account before you're taken to account. Before I start slamming this one and this one and this one – he did this to me, she did this to me – what did I do?

Begin with yourself. It's hard because the self is like Pharaoh – especially if we're pious Muslims. As Rumi says, 'Pharaoh, dressed in the robes of Moses.'

I pray I fast, I'm so good, but what do you do that's wrong? And on the Day of Judgement you will be asked. How did you treat your wife? Was it right? Was it fair? How did you treat your daughters? Did you educate your children? Did you make your mosque the way you should have? How are your schools? Are they real schools? Did they teach everything they had to be taught? Did you fulfil the duties upon you, because there are many – you will be asked that, I'll be asked about that.

You all know what fard Al-'Ayn – individual responsibility. You have to fast, make Hajj, pay Zakat, and bear witness to the ones of God – that's the first thing. Five pillars – we know that, what about fard Al-Kifayah? The obligation that falls upon us as a community to have education, to have health, to have supporting services – to take care of the insane, take care of the abused, to help the people, to have doctors, to have lawyers, to have jobs, wealth in the community. Those are obligations. Those are fard Al-Kifayah; that if the fard Al-Kifayah is not fulfilled, I am a sinner and you are a sinner. If we don't have everything we need in this community to make it strong – even psychiatrists and psychologists and social workers and businesses and money and good houses and good heating – and live a good way of life, then I am iniquitous. That is our law. Even though I didn't have anything to do with it, I am iniquitous until it's done. That is the law of Islām by consensus.

Mā shā Allah – look at this beautiful mosque. I've heard so much about this beautiful mosque and you beautiful people. When you come in here during Ramadhan you fill the whole mosque right? And you pray Tarawīh. And you do so much good. Is that enough? That's all Islām is? We pray, we fast, we perform things, we pray, we pay Zakat, is that all? No. Even the pious person, you pray your prayer but if you neglect those children, neglect the women, neglect the housing, if you don't develop the schools, if you don't get rid of the drugs – I speak about myself as much as you – then we are iniquitous. Ask any scholar here, if I'm not telling the truth. This is the way fard Al-Kifayah works. We have a social obligation to build this community.

And I promise you, the day we build these communities as in shā' Allah we will, the other problems we will begin to take care of – in the most intelligent and most wise way, the most praiseworthy way. And then we will be participants in the solution. We will not be the problem, and we will not be part of the problem, we will be part of the solution.

Charity begins at home. If I tell you about my community in Chicago... I like my community in Chicago. I like the community in Birmingham; they tell me it is the Chicago of England. I love Chicago, it's a rough tough city – it's beautiful but we have some rough areas. We've got some big problems and I don't want to tell you about them. Some are so terrible. But I know what they are so I have to do something about them – it's my responsibility. Your responsibility is Birmingham. Really it is. You've got to build this community. You are – your children are – in a better condition than you were right? There's an incredible improvement.

Muslims who came to Birmingham as workers, underclass, living in poor white areas, a lot of times today you'll find that those whites are still where they were. You'll find that those whites are still where they were. And the Muslims have moved out. That's not uncommon. I've been told it's a fact.

So, we can do it. We are people who belong to one of the greatest civilisations ever seen on Earth. We are the people that brought the Earth to life time and time again. That's not exaggeration, that's not apologetics. And that's what we have to do. We should be alright in Birmingham and in shā' Allah we'll be alright for Birmingham.

I wanted to talk about social psychology, about ideology, but basically I've got no time. So let's just say a word. That we believe in Islām, we believe in this beautiful, Prophetic Law that was given to us, which is rich and beautiful and wonderful, which I find intoxicating. Study the Law and tell me if it's not.

With its maxims, its principles, its jurisprudence. This is one of the greatest legal systems there ever was in the world, and it's certainly one of the oldest continuous systems in the world.

We don't break the rules of our law – our law is very wide, very generous and very broad. But there is something that is worse than breaking a law – that is breaking a psyche. Breaking a psyche. When you break a psyche, you can't repair it. You break a law, you take the punishment, you do the atonement, you ask for forgiveness. When you break the psyche, how do you fix that? When you look at the Muslim world, you look at some of the people – let's take the Afghans – do you realise that there are Afghans who never saw a day of peace in their lives? They were born in war – there are a lot of Palestinians like that. All they know is war – most of them are orphans – what kind of psyche does that create? Especially in our community. We're faced by all kinds of problems and we have to protect these psyches. If we don't begin to work, the psyche is broken.

If you stay in a state of anger – and I said already, you have to get rid of the anger – get over it, get to work. Get to work and then the psyche will be healthy. When we don't do that and we scream and shout and we're looking at the problems but not doing anything, then the psyche's broken, and what do you do about it.

Then we can talk about ideology. There are ideologies out there that are very strange. But again, why do people accept stuff like that? I've seen people accept ideologies that don't make any sense, they're crazy. But then again, you have to look at that person, look at the psyche, and look at the situation. So coming back to where we began. What is the solution? I don't believe there's an easy solution, but I do believe that the solution begins right here, and begins by getting the community back on its feet. To continue what you're already doing, but to do it better and better and better, and make this community into a model for other communities.

Having said all of that, and left you no time, I turn over the floor to questions.