

# The Islamist Politics of Blasphemy Law & the Campaign Against France

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورزم

***Incitement of Muslim sentiments can be exploited even by wheelchair-bound extremists for their own destructive purposes – but it is Muslims themselves who must battle against extremist tendencies: with reason and rejuvenation through a return to the truest essence of the Islamic faith***

Samuel Paty's heinous murder<sup>1</sup> by an enraged Muslim – ignorantly seeking to restore the Holy Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) honour by ending the life of a teacher in the most horrific and terroristic fashion imaginable – has sparked a renewed phase of the so-called "clash of civilizations" that originally erupted when Al Qaeda attacked the American heartland and symbols of its global power in 2001.

Despite the ongoing pandemic, which does not differentiate between what ideology we profess or what religion we preach, Muslims were incensed by continued defamation – perceived or otherwise – of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) through publication of caricatures by Western media outlets: infuriated enough to flout precautionary measures and social distancing guidelines in some (but thankfully not all) of their protests. This time the target was France, where the satirical representations of the Charlie Hebdo publication received greater publicity through the angry Muslim responses they generated, rather than in the supposed secular, intellectual or comedic purposes that their cartoons were presumably generated for in the first instance. President Macron's defense of European ideals and French secularism added a political dimension to the religio-ideological tensions, and the response of Muslim leaders – from Turkey's President Erdoğan to former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad – also received a fair share of public attention and scrutiny. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan<sup>2</sup> said that the failure of the West to appropriately appreciate Muslim sentiments, or to mitigate the 'rising trend of Islamophobia' across the world, was a "the biggest failure of Muslim leadership"<sup>3</sup>.

Fast forward to November 2020, and a wheelchair-bound extremist agitator – whose sole claim to fame is proclaiming himself to be the standard-bearer for defending the honour of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) – has found renewed relevance in his demands for Pakistan to expel the French ambassador. Khadim Hussain Rizvi<sup>4</sup>, a 'fiery' and at times expletive-prone preacher known more for his capability to attract crowds of Muslims in the twin cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi, as well as across Pakistan, and cause traffic disruptions as opposed to any of his contributions to the understanding of Islam as a religion or faith or way of life, has once again produced a sit-in that has forced the Pakistani state to resort to teargas shelling and non-lethal methods to disperse the charged crowds. This is not the first time Rizvi has caused headaches for the nuclear-armed state's federal capital, and a holistic response from state and society will determine whether it will be the last time – or not. The fact that this latest confrontation takes place on the International Day for Tolerance<sup>5</sup> will be considered a mere footnote by the millions of Pakistanis who have had to suffer from transportation diversions in addition to coronavirus restrictions that have already brought all forms of economic activity, development, progress, and daily life to a virtual standstill. A tiny positive aspect – in Pakistan's internal political context, if nothing else – is that mainstream media sources were inundated with news updates pertaining to parliamentary elections in Gilgit-Baltistan<sup>6</sup>, instead of the psychological warfare we would have to endure due to the defamation of Islam undertaken by manipulated Muslims and violent extremists at the connective juncture of Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

1 Jack Stewart. (2020, Nov. 09). "France, Terror, and the Future of Secularism". *Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism*. [https://itct.org.uk/archives/itct\\_article/france-terror-and-the-future-of-secularism](https://itct.org.uk/archives/itct_article/france-terror-and-the-future-of-secularism)

2 Khan also spoke about Islamophobia in his speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2019. See: Annalisa Merelli. (2019, Sept. 28). "Imran Khan at the UNGA: 'There is no such thing as radical Islam'". *Quartz*. <https://qz.com/1715375/imran-khan-at-unga-there-is-no-such-thing-as-radical-islam/>

3 Fatima Zainal. (2020, Feb. 04). "Imran Khan: Islamophobia grew because Muslim leaders failed to explain Islam". *The Star (Malaysia)*. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/02/04/imran-khan-islamophobia-grew-because-muslim-leaders-failed-to-explain-islam>

4 Kalbe Ali. (2017, Dec. 05). "Who is Khadim Hussain Rizvi?". *DAWN News, EOS, December 3rd 2017*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1374182>

5 United Nations. (n.d.). "International Day for Tolerance: 16 November". *United Nations: Observances*. <https://www.un.org/en/observances/tolerance-day>

6 ARY News. (2020, Nov. 16). "GB Election 2020 unofficial results - ARY News". *ARY News Web Desk*. <https://arynews.tv/en/gb-election-2020-unofficial-results-pti-leading/>



An explosive series of tweets<sup>7</sup> by ITCT Deputy Director Faran Jeffery epitomizes – fortuitously and antithetically – the sheer helplessness (and utter exasperation) of many Pakistani Muslims who are as incensed at the actions of this gullible and easily manipulatable mob as we were at the attempted desecration of our Holy Prophet (PBUH). The average Pakistani is beyond sick and tired of Islam being incessantly exploited for personal political mileage: many desperately yearn for a stable and tolerant Pakistan based on an equanimous citizenry and an efficiency state apparatus as a necessary precondition for economic development and sociopolitical progress towards a welfare state; one where all citizens can experience freedom and equality without being discriminated for their belief or ethnic background or socioeconomic class; where the majority no longer have to justify whether they are good or bad Muslims, faithful or non-practicing Muslims, in order to escape terror attacks by those who consider the people of Pakistan at large – and security forces in particular – to be infidels and hypocrites; where the state is true in letter and spirit to the edict of the founding father that citizens are free to go to their mosques or temples because that has nothing to do with affairs of the state, but is a personal matter between a believer and his/her deity; where Muslims are able express their anger and disdain at caricaturing our holy entities not by succumbing to basest of instincts and erupting in anger, but by appealing to our ‘better angels’ and emulating the examples of patience, tolerance, forbearance, understanding, and rational discourse that Islam is actually founded upon<sup>8</sup>.

Lest they forget, Pakistani Muslims are destroying state property built for the use of our fellow countrymen in the alleged defense of the honour of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) who – when visited by the angel Jibreel<sup>9</sup> after being pelted with stones by the children of the infidels of Ta'if<sup>10</sup> – refused to order the destruction of that city and its inhabitants, but instead prayed that Almighty Allah would guide them and their descendants to the Straight Path. That is the example set by the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself, who is also known as 'Rahmatu-lil-Aalameen' or peace for all mankind; and the actions taken "in defense of his honour" on Sunday night and Monday at Faizabad interchange, the traffic artery connecting Islamabad and Rawalpindi, stand in stark and deplorable contrast to what He (PBUH) actually stood for.

The West must surely take Islamist extremism seriously – especially when it manifests in the form of violent terrorism – which does not differentiate between peaceful Muslims and non-Muslims, as the experiences across theaters of the Global War on Terror have revealed to all and sundry. But that by no means absolves Muslims from initiating the much-needed internal monologue of whether we want to be globally vilified as ignorant uncompromising extremists, or be respected as equally productive and positive denizens of an increasingly globalized and multicultural world that we all must share. It is our character and our actions that will reflect positively or negatively on our faith, our beliefs, our values, and our holy icons.

Throughout the past 500 years or so, generations of Muslims have foregone the true teachings and real essence of Islam for political expediency, socio-economic interactivity, cultural assimilation, military subservience, dominance over a perceived or manufactured enemy, or any other temporal crutch that suited their myopic goals. As a result, Muslim youth across the world today are subalterns or outsiders in the West, or constantly at pains to justify their own "Muslimness" in their country of birth. They have been brought up in a strict environment of ‘do as I say, not as I do’ as their parents were, and their parents

*7 While Jeffery's argument that many Pakistanis support such radical activities is disputable, his tweets reflect the desperate and sardonic acknowledgment many Pakistanis are forced to concede – that country continuously appears to be a "hostage to Islamist extremists in every possible way" – especially because this is at least the fourth time that Rizvi's TLP has engaged in such wanton disregard for law and order since 2017. See: <https://twitter.com/Natsecjeff/status/13280112257447942> and <https://twitter.com/Natsecjeff/status/1328261745677373440>*

*8 The Holy Qur'an (2:256) states "There shall be no compulsion in religion".*

*9 Arabization of the Archangel Gabriel.*

*10 See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad%27s\\_visit\\_to\\_Ta%27if](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad%27s_visit_to_Ta%27if); also see: Amal Al-Sibai. (2017, May 19). "The other side of the Prophet's story in Taif". Saudi Gazette.*

*<https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/178798>*

before them. They are not able to benefit from opportunities in the West – opportunities that Muslim nations systematically decimated in their own homelands, and were unable to restore or recreate even after decolonization – because the constant psychological battle between their upbringing and their environment forces them, always, to choose between their faith – a veritable way of life – and their future – where they will indubitably have to struggle and sacrifice, as all human beings have to. The truest, most holy, and most important Islamic beliefs and teachings, those which all Muslims are supposed not only to profess and preach but more importantly to follow and observe themselves, have been relegated to an inaccessible subconscious, while cultural complexities and the necessity of modernization have raised intricate yet valid questions in the minds of today's young Muslims. These dense queries remain unanswered because Muslim parents – and even many Muslim scholars, save a select few – are unable to comprehensively address and resolve them: instead, they resort to simplistic and inadequate formulations of virtue and vice, of sacrosanct and sinful. Rather than seeking knowledge for our own selves, and consulting holy scripture (readily available in all Muslim homes, but disproportionately accessed when compared to our electronic devices), Muslims seek easy and quick solutions which – in most cases – are invariably designed to mislead and misguided; in the worst case, such ‘quick fixes’ lead them astray in the name of Islam, wreaking havoc upon many an innocent.

But is there any solution to this seemingly endless cycle of blame and disruption? Instead of blaming our parents and ancestors for their failures – for bringing us into a world where we neither fit in nor feel we belong, where we have "no one to cry to, no place to call home"<sup>11</sup> – it is high time that the youth of the Ummah take the mantle upon themselves and shoulder the immense responsibility of initiating and affecting a much-awaited rejuvenation. This requires the thirst for true knowledge, which the Internet makes as easily available as it convolutes the same; therefore, knowledge must not lead to self-righteousness, but should always be subservient to the desire to attain more of it, especially when it comes to different, opposing, even uncomfortable viewpoints. A rational understanding of the actual roots and core precepts of Islam would then require validation or confrontation with ‘elders’ (those who know, or claim to know, or are supposed to know more than us) who can actually appeal to reason and guide young Muslims to logically appealing solutions. That requires a wholesome understanding of the teachings of Islam and the history of Muslims, as well as a modicum of comfort with the language, terminology and lexicon that young Muslims employ in their interactions nowadays.

The West must also decide whether freedom of speech also protects freedom to insult and humiliate: in which case another Pandora's Box would be unlocked, rendering religious beliefs irrelevant as legitimate satire would quickly be overshadowed by caustic, unproductive, often toxic, humiliation of one by the other – eventually chipping away at the edifices of respect and decency whereupon the concept of tolerance itself is predicated. While we Muslims ourselves must deal with the tribulations and transgressions ("fitna"<sup>12</sup>) of extremism within our Ummah, the West has another example that serves to point us all in the correct direction: Austria has recently taken legislative steps to criminalize “political Islam”<sup>13</sup>, which may be construed as an attack on political expressions of Islam, or on the religious rights and freedoms of Austrian Muslims, but there are always two sides to the same coin. Islam is not – and should never be used as – a political tool, or a means to rile up a mob and incite violence against the 'other', be they non-Muslims or infidels or whomever. Where every institutionalized religion, by sheer virtue of being an institution, is subject to corruption and disarray especially if it is not subject to periodic

11 *Alice in Chains*. “Nutshell”. *MTV Unplugged*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EKi2E9dVY8>

12 See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fitna\\_\(word\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fitna_(word))

13 “Austria gov’t agrees to preventive arrests, ban ‘political Islam’”. *Al Jazeera*, 11 November 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/11/austria-to-introduce-preventive-detention-after-deadly-attack>

updates and course corrections (which Muslims refer to as Ijtihad<sup>14</sup> and Ijma<sup>15</sup>), Islam is a faith that contains lessons and examples and experiences that Muslims are supposed to emulate and aspire to. For instance, the Holy Qur'an<sup>16</sup> admonishes Muslims against the unjustified killing of even a single human being, equating it to the murder of humanity; and that the saving of one life is similar to saving all of humanity – note that no distinction is made between a Muslim life or non-Muslim life in the Holy Book. Yet the past two decades are replete with examples of militant organizations deploying a distorted version of Islam to kill scores of non-Muslims and Muslims alike. Examples of Islam as a peaceful and tolerant religion – in its purest form – are too many to mention, but for each case and in each instance, there is a positive result as well as a normative lesson to be drawn from the teachings of Islam and from the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Yet, it remains infinitely more convenient to focus on the negative, only because in our day and age, actions attributed to misguided Muslims make an abhorrent disfiguration of Islam appear more plausible as a representation of the whole.

Asking the U.S. to combat Islamic extremism in the Muslim world is akin to asking the Chinese to deal with white supremacy in America, if one would excuse the crude and extremely inappropriate allegories therein. While the West must understand that Muslims – conservative or secular, observant or liberal – would never tolerate depictions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the same way that, for instance, the popular American cartoon "South Park"<sup>17</sup> has done with Jesus Christ (PBUH), it is incumbent on us Muslims to understand that 'non-Muslim outsiders' are neither appropriately equipped nor ideally situated to effectively and holistically deal with the cancer of extremism and radicalization within Islam. It is incumbent upon us Muslims to address this phenomenon with faith and reason, and with the parameters already defined by Islamic beliefs, sources and practices (which I reiterate as true Islam, and not Islam deformed and manipulated for exploitation by militants, terrorist organizations and extremist political groups towards violent and destructive ends). And the concept of periodical rejuvenation<sup>18</sup> has been an inbuilt mechanism, not an innovation or a Western import, within Islamic tradition itself. One needs look no further for one of its most recent iterations than "Saqi Nama"<sup>19</sup> – one of the many thought-provoking poems of Dr. Allama Mohammad Iqbal (RA), the Poet of the East, whose birthday is incidentally celebrated every year on 9<sup>th</sup> November<sup>20</sup> – some couplets of which (roughly translated) may be expounded as follows:

*"The ways of the world have changed,  
With new lyrics, the melodies have changed...  
Let all humanity be freed from slavery,  
Let the young become teachers of the old".*

*ITCT does not necessarily endorse any or all views expressed by the author in the article.*

<sup>14</sup> The process of Muslim jurists making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunna. See: <https://wikidiff.com/ijtihad/ijma>; also see: <https://findanyanswer.com/what-is-the-difference-between-ijma-and-ijtihad>

<sup>15</sup> The consensus of the Muslim community. See *Ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> The Holy Qur'an (5:32) states "Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption in the land – it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one – it is as if he had saved mankind entirely".

<sup>17</sup> Richard Clark. (2007, Nov. 09). "Jesus Goes to South Park". *Christ and Pop Culture*. <https://christandpopculture.com/jesus-goes-to-south-park/>

<sup>18</sup> H.A. Hellyer argues that Islam must rediscover the virtue of "rejuvenation" – new thinking about old texts and concepts – which, contrary to what many people say, is "deeply held within the Islamic tradition". See source: <https://twitter.com/Edourdoo/status/1327618976738729987>

<sup>19</sup> Allama Iqbal Poetry. (n.d.). "(Bal-e-Jibril-142) Saqi Nama". <http://iqbalurdu.blogspot.com/2011/04/bal-e-jibril-142-saqi-nama.html>

<sup>20</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/PakPMO/status/1325689556319023109>; also see: <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23iqbalday>

