



Fundamentalism, Extremism versus Islamic Enlightenment: A Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Throughout entire medieval period when the 'Dark Age' reigned the Europe, an all-round cultural and academic awakening emerged in the Islamic Arab world. The Arab once ruled an empire of that stretched from Central Asia to Spain, and this empire reached its zenith between the eighth and thirteenth centuries Christian era. Muslim scholars of that period knew more especially about science, technology, and the arts than any other contemporary people. They also studied and translated many classical (Greco-Roman and Sanskrit) works of literature and science. Scholars like Westgate rightly argues that it is that Muslim people of earlier days were very much interested in books and learning which almost led to a renaissance like intellectual environment there. It is reasonably observed that such intellectual and scholastic endeavour prepared the ground of the Italian Renaissance to some extent. Despite it this truth was always remained unrevealed, ignored, or denied. But in contrary, in our times, a section of Muslim people assembled under Islamic fundamentalist-jihadists' groups followed the path of sheer extremism, terrorist atrocities and destruction. This is nothing but a complex paradox. The present paper humbly attempts to shed some light on both these aspects--- Islam-induced all-round enlightenment in earlier days, and widely spread Muslim fundamentalism-jihadism and sporadic Islamic terrorism in current times. Under this perspective the present study should highlight especially the trends and factors articulating the significant contribution of early Muslim scholars towards to development of modern sciences, such as physics, chemistry, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. The Arab Muslims, although a fierce, conquering race in the historical context, were also intellectually curious and enthusiastic. Unlike the illiterate destructive Huns who besieged the ailing

Roman Empire, Muslim scholars preserved, translated, and developed the philosophical and scientific legacy of the ancient classical world. Many universities, research institutes, libraries and observatories emerged in the leading cities of Baghdad, Damascus, Jerusalem, Cairo, Alexandria, and Cordoba during the golden period of enlightenment in Islamic world. Unfortunately, these radical extremist Muslims along with their collaborators who had demolished the remains of ancient civilizations in the Middle East and West Asia in near past in the name of Islam had become proved as clear distraction and deviation from original Islamic teachings and knowledge. According to the Holy Quran and Hadith among the five kinds of jihad-fi-sabillah (struggle in the cause of Allah) the important one is jihad by pen and knowledge (jihad bil qalam/ilm)—a struggle for good against evil forces through scholarly study of [Islamic, Ijtihad (legal reasoning), and through sciences]. Only nurturing of ancient knowledge can strengthen as well as enrich the archaic Islam and Islamic culture.

Key-words: Islam, Enlightenment, Study of Sciences, Jihadism, Fundamentalism

I. Introduction

Unprecedented intellectual and scholastic endeavour and activities of Islamic world and particularly Arab-controlled land during medieval period prepared the ground of the Italian Renaissance silently. But unfortunately, this hilarious achievement had been never admitted and or acknowledged by the Western Culture perhaps due to some hidden and unknown factors. [1] The Arab once ruled a vast expanded empire which was stretched from Central Asia to Spain, and this empire recached its zenith between the sixth and thirteenth centuries Christian Era. Muslim scholars



of that period knew more especially about science, technology and the arts than any other contemporary people. Indeed, 'the Islamic appropriation of Hellenistic natural philosophy, mathematical science, medicine, and philosophical teachings is one of the remarkable events in the history of learning. As one of the most important intellectual movements in human history, the translation movement in Islam resulted from the coincident of a few factors. Of fundamental significance was the new urban, multicultural, multireligious, and multilingual milieu of Baghdad. The natural philosophy tradition in Islam was part of a larger tradition of philosophy.' [2]

During a longtime it is loosely argued about the poor standard of living of Muslims throughout the world and their limited opportunities along with undeveloped status of technology within the Muslim countries in comparison with the West. Most of the western scholars as well as media leap to the conclusion that the Muslim countries are 'backward', because Islam cannot adapt itself to the changing conditions; is actually against progress and against scientific advancement. [3] On the other hand, objective study of the Islamic history can prove that this is a complete fallacy and misconception. Muslim scholars of earlier days translated many classical (Greco-Roman and Sanskrit) works of literature and science. Westgate [4] opines that in fact the Muslims were very much interested in books and learning. Scholars like Rhazes (al Razi ninth century), Vienna (Ibn Sina c. tenth century) and Averroes (1136-1198 A.D) were among best known of Muslim philosophers. They studied the Greek writers, particularly Plato and Aristotle. Their goals seem to have been (perhaps rather surprisingly) to try to find ways to reconcile the ideas of the ancient Greeks with the teachings of Islam. [5] It is rightly observed that 'the period between the seventh to the fifteenth centuries is considered as the Golden Age of Islamic Civilization.' Throughout this period there was great emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge. While the progress of scientific knowledge in Europe languished during the Dark Ages, science flourished in the golden Age of Islam. The Renaissance that subsequently occurred in Europe might not have taken place without the contribution of Muslim science in the preceding period.[6]



(Islam and enlightenment in golden period)

However, throughout last few decades a fully reactionary countertrend has emerged in Muslim world which played a vital role in damaging the real image of Islamic culture. Few mushrooms like radical Muslim organizations in different countries mainly in the Middle East or West Asia organized by the Muslim fundamentalists or rather extremists had chosen the dangerous path of self-immolation. They never respect their ancient Islamic scholars who created and developed a liberal environment of learning. They manipulated wrongly few Quranic verses relating to 'Jihad' for their own goals or narrow interests which had played a vital role in operating worldwide Islamic terrorism. Indeed, 'Fundamentalism is a concept that was originally associated with Protestant religious groups and has only recently become connected with Islam. Among Muslims, this association is highly contested. Terrorism, also an elusive term having many delimitations and contextual meanings, has recently become closely associated, but cannot be exclusively connected, with Islam.' [7]

In such perspective, the present paper attempts to shed some light on an unavoidable paradox and apparently contradiction—all-round Islamic enlightenment in earlier days and widely spread Muslim fundamentalism and sporadic Islamic terrorism in recent times. But at the end of the day, it should be argued reasonably that there is no scope of doubt that in original Islam there is no room for blind violence or terrorism, and Islam vehemently opposes since beginning the indiscriminate violence or terror. The Quran states emphatically, 'anyone who has killed another except in retaliation, it is as if he has killed the whole mankind and serving the life of one person is as good deed as serving the whole community.' [8] So far methodology is, followed by the present author for this discourse is concerned, the original Islamic texts, scriptures, chronicles such as Quran and

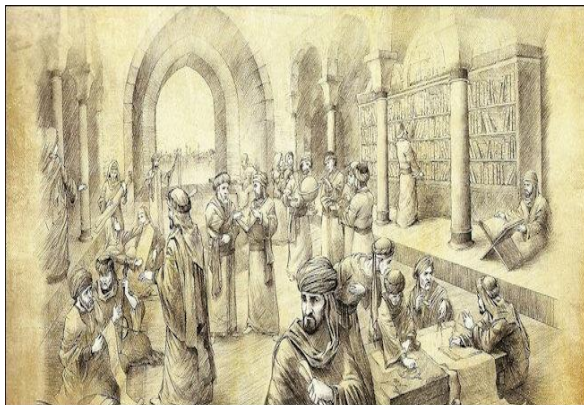


Hadith and available modern literatures have been used freely to corroborate this empirical study.

II. Islamic awakening during medieval period which prepared the ground for Italian Renaissance

Muslim educational and cultural activities were noticed first time in the eighth century A.D., primarily in disseminate the teaching of the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet. The first task in this endeavour was to record the oral traditions and collect the written manuscripts. This vast activity of “seeking knowledge” (*talab al-ilm*) resulted in the creation of specifically Arab sciences of tradition, history, and literature. In fact, during Middle Ages when the “Dark Age” was prevailing in entire Europe, the world witnessed an all-round awakening and enlightenment around the Muslim-dominated Arab land. [9]

Organization of education and learning developed naturally in Islamic land in course of time. It is stated that ‘When higher learning in the form of tradition grew in the 8th and 9th centuries, it was centered around learned men to whom students travelled from far and near and from whom they obtained a certificate (*ijazah*) to teach what they had learned. Through the munificence of rulers and princes, large private and public libraries were built, schools and colleges arose.’ [10] Universities and research institutes were established in the leading Muslim cities of Baghdad, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Cairo and Cordova during the said period. Further the book business flourished.



(One of the early Islamic libraries)

In universities, palaces and homes of wealthy merchants could be found large and impressive libraries had become available to European scholars in translation. Again, ‘The letter point was of great historical importance; eventually

much of the scientific knowledge that the Muslims had gathered from the ancient classical world and from India was passed to the west, through Spain and southern Italy around the time of Crusades. At that time most European scholars realized the tremendous scientific and technological superiority of the Islamic world and eagerly sought translations of Muslim works.’ [11] It is wisely observed that throughout subsequent centuries, colleges and quasi-universities (called *madrrasah* or *dar-al-ulum*) arose throughout the Muslim world from Spain (whence philosophy and science were transmitted to the Latin West) across central Asia to India.[12]

There is hardly any doubt that these Greek and Arab writings that flowed into Europe, especially after the beginning of the twelfth century, made up a rich legacy of scientific and philosophical knowledge. For example, Arabic (Hindi/India) numerals and the zero-symbol made possible a decimal system of computation. The zero with the numerals made it possible for the simple expressions for numbers to have infinite values, thereby helping solve particular problems. Translations of mathematical treaties in Spain subsequently transferred this knowledge to Europe. Also, Euclidean geometry, together with algebra and trigonometry from the Arab world, greatly increased the scope of accuracy of mathematics, especially useful for later astronomical applications during and after the Renaissance. [13] Scholars accepted the fact that the early Indians developed the number symbols which served as a basis for ‘Arabic’ numerals. Actually, these were only called ‘Arabic’ numerals by western medieval scholars; they were really Indian in origin and were adopted and carried westwards by Arab traders and invaders. [14] This transfer of information occurred just in time, far from about 1350 A.D onwards, the Mongols in the east and the Christians in Spain began systematically to destroy Islamic books in a wholesale manner, as part of their anti-Muslim wave of feeling at that time. Yet fortunately, a large number of Islamic books and manuscripts survived in Egypt, Persia and India, from where most of our knowledge of Muslim civilization has originated. As a result, every present-day intellectual discipline owes a debt to the scientific heritage of Islam. [15]

It is not surprising fact that early Islamic teaching encouraged and promoted the pursuit of scholarship and science. Indeed ‘seeking knowledge about the natural world was seen as the duty of every Muslim as the following Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) show: “*He who pursues the road of knowledge, Allah will direct to the road of Paradise...The scholar’s ink is the holier than the*



martyr's blood.” Things that inspired the quality of life, like science and technology, were encouraged and welcomed. These included practical things like navigational aids for travelers, geographical maps, medical knowledge, ways of measuring and calculating, and tools for agriculture.’ [16]

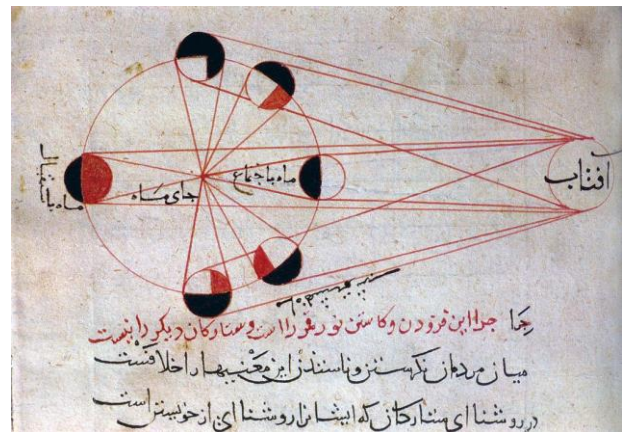


(Earlier compass in Islam)

The use of paper and books was very important in sharing and promoting knowledge in early Islam. Muslim people in those days learned how to make paper from Chinese papermakers, and a paper mill was built in Baghdad. We have already mentioned that a huge industry was established and there were bookshops and important libraries in cities right throughout the Islamic empire. In a sense, a new unified Arabic language was developed which became the language of international scholarship. [17]

A lot of works has been done meanwhile in regard with the early Islamic scholastic endeavour in the field of almost each and every branch of scientific knowledge—astronomy, physics, chemistry and alchemy, mathematics, medicine and surgery, technology and industry, geography and so on. Early Islamic culture had produced a number of scholars, authors, thinkers, philosophers, poets, scientists, physicists, mathematicians, artists, architects and musicians who formed together a unique galaxy of knowledge, learning and enlightenment. There is not sufficient scope to mention here in detail in this study. In fact, plethora of historical data and evidences show emphatically that Muslim scholars made significant contribution towards the development of many ‘modern’ sciences mentioned earlier. It should be stated again that, ‘In the Medieval age, the Muslims led the world in their pursuit of knowledge. Much of this

knowledge was discovered by Muslim scientists while other knowledge was derived from various cultures including Greeks, Persians, Indian, and Chinese. The Muslims synthesized, elaborated, and transmitted this knowledge to Spain; and eventually, to the entire world. In western Europe at this time, most of the knowledge of the Greeks was lost. It was only through the transfer of Greek knowledge (including Aristotle’s philosophy, Ptolemy’s geography, Hippocrates’s medicine) by Islam Spain that this information ever got to Western Europe.’ [18] In fact, scientific knowledge, architecture, mathematics, and philosophy flourished in Spain during the rule of Umayyad. Beginning in the Middle Ages, men seeking knowledge would travel to Spain to obtain Muslim science.



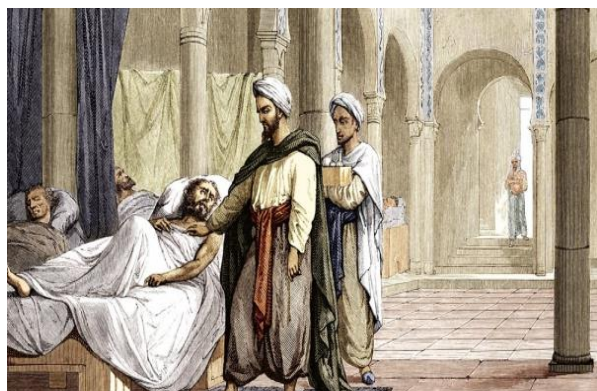
(Arabic astronomy in earlier days)

It may be argued here that ‘the Islamic Empire consisted of a society that was multicultural in terms of languages, customs, traditions, and religion. As Muslims went forth from Arabia to conquer the countries surrounding them, they encompassed vast land with peoples of different faiths and cultures. Thus, the Islamic Empire not only consisted of Muslims from three continents, Arabs, Persians, Turks, Africans, Indians and other Asians, but also Jews, Christians and other faiths. Therefore, scholars from all faiths worked under the umbrella of Islam to produce a unique culture of knowledge and learning.’ [19] Again, having acquired the knowledge the Islamic world set about not only assimilating, testing and analyzing, but also adding important and original contributions to that knowledge. It is further observed that modern science as we know it today works with theories and models that must be tested empirically, starting in the fields of mathematics, astronomy and medicine.

The Muslims developed the procedures for testing knowledge both empirically and logically.



However, an important characteristic of Islamic sciences, was its experimental character. [20] Islamic scientists were interested especially in the applied sciences, in the construction of apparatus, in testing theories by undertaking observations, and analysis of results through mathematics. [21] Similarly, these ideas and procedures were all available in Western Europe through the seminal works of Islamic scholars before the times of Galileo, Descartes and Newton to whom they have been largely contributed. [22] It is rightly said that from the 'ashes' of medieval Arab/Islamic scientific dominance, there arose a new tree of knowledge, spreading its roots and branches throughout Renaissance Europe. A wind of change then blew through its literary leaves, an element conceived within the mind of enlightenment, despite repression and persecution by fanatical theological dogmatism.



(Islamic roots of the modern hospital)

III. Distortion of Islam and the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism-jihadism in contemporary world

Throughout last few decades, sections of Muslim theologians and activists had been engaged themselves heavily in mission to spread Islamic fundamentalism and radical extremism ignoring intentionally the glorious as well as enlightened heritage of Islamic culture. Those people deliberately misinterpreted the original Islamic teachings, recorded in the Quran and Hadith and misguided the Muslim mass worldwide. In spite of their such evil effort mainstream Islamists represent the overwhelming majority within the Islamic political spectrum, whereas jihadis are a tiny but critical minority. Since 9/11 catastrophe, Al Qaeda, the most notorious terrorist group has been portrayed as an Islamist front united in armed struggle, or jihad, against the rest of the world particularly Christian world.

It is argued reasonably that jihad in Islam is no equivalent to terrorism or such nasty and barbaric nuisance. In fact, jihad is one of the most misunderstood, misinterpreted and abused aspects of Islam through the years. In Islamic theology, found in the Quran and Hadith, jihad is never a tool of waging war or unleashing violence against the innocents. It is never a means of flexing the muscles or bullying the weak and oppressed. [23] Jihad as prescribed in the Quran and other Islamic scriptures implies the striving of spiritual good. The jihad involves noticeable effort for righteousness. Prophet Muhammad said: "*The best jihad is (by) the one who strives against his own self for Allah, the Mighty and Majestic.*" [24] The Holy Scripture mentioned further that: "*Fight those in the way of Allah who fight you, but do not be aggressive: Allah does not like aggressiveness.*" [25] The Quran does not in any way sanction the killing of human beings, and it is only by great distortion of theology, and gross wordplay, that this form of sanction is legitimized by fundamentalists. Syed Saidi [26] justifiably observed that 'It is important to understand the sources of Islamic divine law and their epistemological evolution, to comprehend how fundamentalist discourse tries to gain its legitimacy. Muslim fundamentalists seldom engage in formal religious training; they are also anti-progressive, in as much they tend to regress from Islam's standards of religious education to a home-grown mixture of ideology. The decay intellectual process like independent reasoning (*Ijtihad*) which was a coveted tool for Islamic schools of law since antiquity.' Indeed, Islamic progressive thought process once became weak and this vacuum has been taken up largely by the fundamentalist discourse. The liberating tradition of acquisition of knowledge, related to great thinkers like Al-Ghazzali, has been superseded by the polarized thought process of radical thinkers. [27] Debatably, if the Muslim brand of philosophy had continued in its former progressiveness, it would have been harder for the modern fundamentalist project to proceed as much as it has today. Though there are several factors behind the exponential rise of fundamentalism, the dearth of modern scholarship, supplementing the already rich classical Islamic literature, can certainly be considered one. [28]

It has been revealed that the Islamist jihadis are gaining strength rapidly through manipulating the Quranic verses. Fawaz A. Georges argued in this broad spectrum, 'Since the time of the Prophet there has existed a consensus among Muslim *ulemas* (religious scholars and jurists) on the status of jihad as a collective duty ("fard



Kifaya”), one that is determined by the whole community, not by the individuals. But in contrast jihadis of all colours consider jihad a permanent and personal obligation (“fard Ayn”). [29] Consequently, Osama bin Laden, the chief of Al Qaeda, subscribed to this definition of jihad as an “individual duty” for each and every Muslim who is capable of going war. [30] In a very misleading way, Osama once said to justify the terrorist atrocities, ‘fighting is part of our religion and our Shariah. Those who love God and the Prophet and this religion are not deny a part of that religion. This is very serious matter.’ [31]

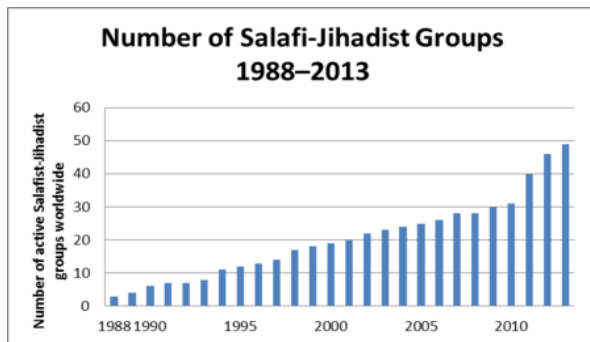
Today’s fundamentalist ideologue portrays jihad as an all-encompassing struggle that requires full and permanent mobilization of Muslim society against real and imagined enemies at home and abroad. [32] Again, most important phenomenon of this type of jihad is ‘Salafism’. The worldwide Salafist Jihad has been considered an extreme version of Sunni Muslim ideology. The basic principles of this type of Salafist jihad which characterize severe terrorist atrocities—mass casualties, use of new technologies, international-multinational membership and of Islamic religious base. [33] It has been accepted that Salafism originated in eighteenth century in Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Muhammad Ibn al Wouahad, a Muslim religious leader. He preached for a return in the original Islamic tradition and eschewed modernity in every mode. But in true sense, the spiritual founder of this new definition of Salafist jihad was Sayyed Qutb of Egypt in the twentieth century who excessively inspired his blind follower Osama bin Laden and his close associates like Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri, Mohammad Atef and Ayman al-Zawahiri. [34] In course of time, such jihadism has gradually involved into a living experience, not only an intellectual discourse.



(Sayyi Qutb of Egypt, the Father of Salafist Jihadis)

However, in contemporary Islamic fundamentalism all the emphasis is on ritualism, divested of its epistemic doctrinal context. Thus, the Quran’s heavily doctrinal and tolerant side is marginalized. [35] The Hadith also get the same selective treatment; the quest for knowledge which was an extremely potent element of the doctrine is underplayed, in favour of selective militant paradigms. [36] Undoubtedly, modern variants of Islam such as Wahhabism and Salafism are based on adherence to ritualism than the pursuit of knowledge. [37] Those extremists have tried their best to misinterpret the Quran for sake of propagation of their ideologue. But ‘the Quran is inviolate to Muslims. They universally consider its text unchanged and irrevocable over the centuries. If the Quran is picked up, there are a much larger number of surahs which ordain clemency and peace, and there are certainly none which sanction the murder of innocent bystanders of terrorism.

If non-Muslims disagree with the message of Islam, Muslims are not allowed to employ any method of intimidation or compulsion. “There shall be no coercion in matters of faith.” [38] Hrair Dekmejian [39] contends that, ‘...Confrontation is an important part of the world view of Islamic fundamentalists.’ Sometimes, the fundamentalist message will contain outright distortions of fact, besides half-baked truth. Since mid-1990s, a lot of violent outfits and jihadist organizations following the radical ideologue of Qutb, Srriya, Sukri Mustafa, Abdul Rahman, Faraz, Zawahiri, Zuhdi and their blind followers have unleashed indiscriminate terror operating senseless crimes in the name of Islamic jihad throughout various parts of the world. Michaletos [40] observed in this context, ‘the worldwide Salafist Jihad is a formidable network of human resources and capital aimed at striking terror against the West’ and also against the ‘near enemies’. Moreover, idealistic Islamic men are recruited through religious indoctrination by jihadist leadership and taught that they will not go through the judgement if they die fighting the unbelievers. As result of this self-made promulgation, ‘Terrorist acts committed by young men willing to work and give their lives to obey the divine command to war and die fighting these unbelievers.’ [41]



(Worldwide Salafist Jihadi groups)

However, this darkest chapter in the vast history of Islam has been still vibrant. In such perspective, it may be argued logically that such development is one of the ideological and moral challenges to liberal democracy and also almost against the original Islamic teachings and heritage. [42] A fair number of scholars have put forward the hypothesis that the fundamentalist project is more than a pursuit of totalitarianism than a struggle of merging the spiritual with temporal.

IV. Hypothesis: In search of peace, knowledge and enlightenment founded on archaic Islamic heritage

Indiscriminate violence and full-fledged militancy have been considered and preferred modus operandi by the active deadly jihadist-fundamentalist organizations in current times. But this rhetoric obviously is not accepted by all Muslim people and communities unquestionably. It is generally admitted that this violence in the name of Islamic Jihad has received both theoretical and material support from some wealthy and influential in Muslim society, especially located in the Gulf and Pakistan. The youth and innocent Muslim people simply have been trapped, brainwashed and consequently victimized in large number by these senseless insurgencies and movements in the name of Allah, Shariah, Jihad and Islam. [44] Saidi rightly observed, 'The extremist's place in the Islamic mythos consequently has to be created, without too much help from classical Islamic literature. Thus, the fundamentalist is striving to legitimize his radical actions, and as divine sanction may not be so readily forthcoming, it sometimes needs to be invented.' [45]

The sensible Muslim civil society think that most of the backward, poor and weak Muslim states mainly belongs to South, Southeast, Central and West Asia and Africa need to wage a long-time jihad, "greater jihad" against their

illiteracy and poverty. [46] Any rational-minded Muslim can argue that it is high time Muslim leaders and jurists around the world take a common and strong stand that these insane elements, ideology and distorted fatwas in the name of the Islam and Allah must be condemned. Jihad had become a cottage industry particularly in few Muslim countries like Pakistan, Nigeria, Libya, Afghanistan and so on. Sometimes, the Western powers too have played an active role in helping and functioning this new industry for their vested interests directly or indirectly.

On the other hand, in solving the problem, raised by continuous jihadist-terrorist atrocities under the Muslim radical and extremist groups, non-Muslim world particularly the Western World has to change their narrow mindset. They should acknowledge first the truth that Islam as well entire Muslim populations are never be considered as terrorist, anti-progressive and anti-Western in attitude. Winning the confidence of the bulk of common and innocent Muslim population around the world is one of the most important duties of the leaders of the world. The modern Muslim governments should be assisted with every means possible. The greater Muslim society believes that growing Islamic militancy would be dissociated and defeated one day because in modern civilized world 'real jihad is to use of democracy and democratic institutions to realize the noble goals for which the Prophet of Islam suggested all his life.' [47] One of the important sources of Islamic law, preserved in Classical Islam which has been relegated to lesser importance in the prevailing context is *Ijtihad*. Indeed, 'this is the process of making a legal decision, by independent interpretation of the legal sources in the context of prevailing circumstances.' [48] This practice should be fostered more and more. The common Muslim peoples should be enlightened that fundamentalism and fanaticism was never promoted by the Islam since its beginning. Rather, the modern fundamentalist is anti-historical in the sense that he tries to recreate an Islamic paradigm, going against the very spirit of Islamic life and culture he is trying to emulate. In the early centuries of Islam, the quest for knowledge was permanent in juristic thought; in fundamentalist discourse it is absent, or at best, present a warped state. [49]

The Muslim world must admit that the illumination and enlightenment, focussed by the glorious past had been faded away in course of time. Undoubtedly, 'scientific progress in Muslim countries requires greater personal and intellectual freedom. Without this there can be no thinking,



ideas, innovations, discoveries, or progress. The real challenge is not better equipment or faster internet connectivity.' [50] The Islamic population highly need freedom from all dogmatic beliefs and practices and a culture that questions rather than obeys. Common Islamic people should never forget that 'Muslim intellectualism provided an essential link between Classical and Renaissance achievement, which led ultimately to the development of lucid contemporary theories.' [51] It should be highlighted with great importance that Islam (submission) is a religion of peace, no matter what certain media or deranged individual or vested groups say or claim. Islam revolves around the concept of peace and knowledge. The Holy Quran says, "If they resort to peace, so shall you, and put your trust in God. He is Hearer, the Omniscient." [52]

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