

Extremism comes in many guises

In this first of a two-part series on 'Extremism, Terrorism and Islam: Juristic and historical perspectives', Mohammad Hashim Kamali, founding CEO of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies Malaysia, discusses the various forms of religious extremism, and how they triumph wherever moderation is weak



MOHAMMAD
HASHIM
KAMALI

EXTREMISM has hardly commanded a credible majority in Muslim societies. Extremists are usually small groups of people that advocate narrow and radical views and ideologies.

They are not able to persuade and influence the majority through rational debate and scholarly opinion, which is why they usually take to the streets and resort to violent methods to buttress their claims.

Extremists are also groups of people who champion an ideology, react to perceived injustice, or a crisis, whether real or imaginary, resulting from the conduct of others.

Political extremism may also be a reaction against the leadership of a country or in opposition to a dominant ideology. The larger than real presence of extremism is felt due to views and claims daringly expressed, and actions taken boldly beyond the ordinary, done in order to attract attention or merely to gain sympathy. Though such daring and desperate tactics shock society, they are short-lived and ultimately self-defeating.

One of the first markers of extremism is fanatic advocacy of one view or opinion and ignoring others, even though the person or party concerned knows of the existence of other views. This kind of fanaticism is in a state of denial to all else, including that which may be in the public interest.

The prevailing conditions of time and place, dialogue and search for balanced solutions are ignored, and the extremist has even gone on to accuse those who do not follow him of ignorance and transgression.

Extremists are usually so certain of the correctness of their cause that they focus clearly and project an unequivocal vision. They have a black and white view of the world that creates certainty in an uncertain world.

That also explains why they possess an ability to attract attention disproportionate to their numbers or percentage in any given population. By contrast, the moderates tend to be reflective, see nuances and rarely exhibit certainty of their goals. Extremists tend to triumph not because of their inherent strength, but because of the weakness of moderates.

Furthermore, the extremists turn a blind eye to the needs and wishes of people and show eagerness to impose harsh and taxing demands on them. They refuse to acknowledge that there are those who are fit and healthy and also

those who may be weak, in poor health and unprepared to comply with their demands.

Islamic history has known three main varieties of extremism: theological extremism, political extremism, and practical extremism.

Theological extremism (*al-tataruf al-dini*) often subscribed to particular beliefs that stood in conflict with the Quran, the Sunnah and general consensus (*ijma'*) of Muslims.

A reference is made in this connection to early theological movements such as the Qadariyyah, Jahmiyyah, Murji'ah and Bitiniyyah.

The Qadariyyah (advocates of free will or *qadar*) subscribed to the view that man was the sole creator of his own conduct. The Jahmiyyah (followers of Jahm b. Safwan) subscribed to total predestination; the Murji'ah (suspenders of judgment, proponents of hope or *rija'*) suspended passing and judgment on sinners, including those who held extremist views among the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, referring them to God's judgment.

The Batiniyyah (esotericists — a Shia sub-sect) held that every word of the Quran had a hidden meaning known only to their imam. To these may be added the *ghulat* (extremists) of Shia as well as some of the contemporary movements that include the Takfir and Hijrah Association (*Jamaat al-takfir wa'l-hijrah*) of Egypt,



An Islamic State militant uses a power tool to destroy a sculpture of a winged-bull Assyrian protective deity at the Ninevah Museum in Mosul, Iraq, on Thursday. IS has destroyed a number of shrines, including Muslim holy sites, to eliminate what it views as heresy. AP pic

which charged the Egyptian state with infidelity that had allegedly turned into *Dar al-Kufr* (abode of unbelief). It was a duty, therefore, of Muslims to leave that country and emigrate.

Political extremism (*al-tasaruf al-siyasi*) is marked by confrontation and challenge of the authority of a lawful government, such as the *Kharijites* (outsiders) who emerged in Iraq and boycotted the authority of the fourth Caliph Ali bin Abu Talib as well as declaring permissible the killing of all Muslims except their own followers.

The *Kharijites* also held the extremist view that committing a major sin amounts to renunciation of Islam. One of their factions, the *Azariqah*, further added that a person renounces Islam even if he committed a major sin by error or personal judgment and *ijtihad*, which is why they charged the caliph Ali with infidelity over the issue of Arbitration (*talkem*) with his challenger, the then governor of Sham Mu'awiyah. For the caliph had exercised his own *ijtihad* in that matter.

Lastly, practical extremism (*al-tasaruf al-amal*), which consists of extremist conduct, such as self-immolation, excessive fasting and all-night vigil, and acts that depart from sound human nature (*fitrah*), valid Sunnah and precedent.

One may add to these excessive dieting to keep slim, especially among younger women, excessive-

ly disciplinarian practices with one's children and the like, which are injurious and harmful.

Terrorism is also practical extremism, be it local, national or international, in peacetime or war, that consists mainly of acts of terror, explosives and suicide bombings that kill innocent people and inflict mass destruction.

Such activities may even occur in the course of a legitimate war that may have been duly declared by the lawful leader.

The basic position of such acts of terror is the same in shariah, whether its victims are Muslim or otherwise, and whether it is against a weak, or a more powerful party or state.

As we watch the so-called Islamic State group or ISIS fighters rampaging through the Middle East, tearing apart states and cities and massacre innocent civilians, it may be difficult to believe we are living in the 21st century.

The sight of terrified refugees and victims of indiscriminate brutality and violence is all too reminiscent of the Crusaders and the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan. The ferocious cruelty of these militants, that of the 9/11 terrorists, the Boko Haram in Nigeria, the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, etc., raise a distinctly modern concern over the connection between religion and violence.

TOMORROW: Addressing the root cause of extremism