

Violence in the Name of Religion: The Jewish Perspective on the Crisis of ISIS

By Miriam F. Elman, Ph.D

The following is a transcript of Dr. Elman's remarks delivered at Abraham's Table, an interfaith panel discussion held on February 10, 2015 at Interfaith Works in Syracuse, NY, co-sponsored by InterFaith Works, the Turkish Cultural Center (TCC), and the Peace Islands Institute. Other panelists included Father Linus DeSantis of the Alibrandi Catholic Center and Tanweer Haq, former Islamic Chaplain of Hendricks Chapel of Syracuse University. Dr. Elman has included sources as hyperlinks embedded in the text. Comments are welcome and can be addressed to melman@maxwell.syr.edu

I'd like to start by thanking Beth Broadway [Director of InterFaith Works] and Tim Saka of the TCC for inviting me to take part in this panel. It's a great honor to be here in your new, beautiful home.

As we all know, exactly one month ago sixteen innocent people—Jews, Muslims, and Christians—were gunned down in Paris by ISIS and Al Qaeda wannabes who found their purpose in terror.

In the Middle East too, the monstrous brutality of ISIS seems to have no bounds: the quick succession of blunt-knife beheadings of American journalists James Foley, Steven J. Sotloff, and Peter Kassig; the [enslavement](#) and horrific mistreatment of women; the mass [expulsions](#) and crucifixions of Christians; and the attempted [genocide](#) of the Yazidi are among the atrocities that these fanatics enact in the name of their God.

Every week there seems to be a new cruelty—a just released United Nations [report](#) tells of mentally disabled Iraqi children used as suicide bombers and others being buried alive. And then there's the burning alive of the Jordanian prisoner of war, pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh, lit on fire as he was trapped in a makeshift cage, his torture captured in yet another slick recruitment video.

In preparing my remarks for tonight, I've thought a lot about the crisis of ISIS (also called ISIL, the Islamic State, or *Daesh*—as it's known in the Arabic).

But I've also thought a great deal about the courageous men and women who refuse to be intimidated into silence and, often at great risk to themselves and to their families, are standing up for a different Islam—one that can co-exist with the fundamental human rights of liberty, freedom, pluralism and the rights of women, of the child, and of all religious minorities.

I'm thinking here of:

Salman Taseer, the former [governor](#) of the Punjab province in Pakistan, who spoke out against his country's blasphemy laws and paid for it with his life; and,

Raif Badawi, a Saudi Arabian [blogger](#), who for the “crime” of writing about Islam and modernity was sentenced to 10 years in jail and 1,000 lashes in public floggings; and,

Mohammad Daoud Dajani, a Palestinian whose devotion to Islam led him into a career as an activist for Jewish-Muslim co-existence, and who arranged study tours of the Nazi death camps for his students, and who was endlessly harassed for it, and eventually last year was railroaded from Al Quds University. And, if that wasn’t enough, this month extremists [firebombed](#) his car, sending yet another clear message that anyone who opposes them can be targeted, anywhere and at any time; and, closer to home:

Zuhdi Jasser, a Muslim-American physician who founded the *American Islamic Forum for Democracy* ([AIFD](#)) thirteen years ago, and who over the years has been repeatedly intimidated, thrown out of his Phoenix mosque, and [defamed](#) as an apostate. I had the great pleasure of interacting with Mr. Jasser on several occasions when I lived in Arizona. He’s a good man.

And so, I’m left asking myself: am I doing enough to help these brave individuals? Or am I just free-riding on their hard work? What is my responsibility—as a Jew, as an American, and as a human being?

I’m not a theologian, nor am I an ordained cleric. Like many of you, to get answers to these questions I turn for guidance to my esteemed colleagues seated with me here tonight, to our other community faith leaders in the room, and to my own Rabbi. And so, my remarks this evening will draw on my expertise as a social scientist.

I’d like to make four general points.

First, what we are witnessing today is a global crisis of much larger proportions than just ISIS.

ISIS is currently a grave threat to the Middle East region. But my own view is that, just like Al Qaeda’s reign of terror in Iraq eventually ended, so too we will see the demise of ISIS. It too will overstep; it too will exact such a high cost on society that people will rise up against it.

This is what happened in 2007 with the Anbar Awakening. Revolted by Al Qaeda’s barbarism, Iraqi Sunnis eventually defected, depriving it of its mass base of support. To be sure, the surge of American troops, and the adoption of a “light footprint” approach to combating terrorism (including the use of drones and special operations) greatly helped to stabilize Iraq in 2007-2008—it’s one of more [underappreciated success stories](#) of former President George W. Bush’s second term. Yet this turn-around in Iraq couldn’t have happened without the help of Muslim

moderates. And perhaps now we are seeing the first signs of the end of ISIS, with Jordan and the UAE more fully committed to the US military coalition arrayed against it.

ISIS will come and go, but its ideology is a mass brand that will outlast its demise. What we are witnessing today is not just the crisis of ISIS, but a crisis in the Muslim-Arab world—one that has global dimensions.

This is a crisis born of many factors but it has produced a widespread appeal for radical Islamic fundamentalism. Huge portions of societies from Pakistan to Palestine now support this ideology.

Of course, Islam is not the only Abrahamic faith to produce fanatics. Jewish and Christian extremists have also cherry picked key passages from their sacred texts and teachings to justify heinous acts of violence. The issue is always how others within the faith react to this betrayal.

As an example, consider the aftermath of Baruch Goldstein's heinous slaughter of twenty nine innocent Muslim worshippers at the Hebron mosque in 1994, and Yigal Amir's assassination of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin in 1995. In the wake of these terrible crimes, Israel's *Kahane* movement—the radical fundamentalist organization that provided the 'community of belief' for both terrorists—was outlawed. Israel's Chief Rabbi went on record saying "sensible Judaism spits you out". And so too did the vast majority of Israeli society, and the vast majority of the world's fourteen million Jews.

The seminal study of religion in the name of violence, published a year before 9/11 by the preeminent sociologist [Mark Juergensmeyer](#), offers a number of cases where Jews, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus perpetrated brutal attacks on unarmed women, men, and children in the name of God. Judaism and Christianity also have their Baruch Goldsteins, their Yigal Amirs, their Timothy McVeighs and Anders Breiviks.

The other Abrahamic faiths are not immune from violence in the name of religion, and the majority of the globe's 1.6 billion Muslims are not terrorists.

Indeed, we should not forget that on that fateful day in Paris last month the policeman who gave his life to protect his countrymen was a Muslim. So too was Mustapha Ourrad, *Charlie Hebdo's* copy-editor who was killed in the attack. And so too was Lassana Bathily, a twenty-four year old Malian stock clerk employed at Paris' *Hyper Cacher*, who led fifteen Jewish customers to safety, hiding them in the supermarket's freezer.

The heroism of these French Muslims perhaps makes the unfortunate reality even more salient: most terror attacks today are perpetrated by radical Islamist groups. A RAND report from a few years ago showed that of the suicide attacks that have occurred since 9/11, eighty one percent have been perpetrated by Islamic groups. Recent RAND [studies](#) offer similar sobering findings.

And a [new study](#) by researchers at King's College of London found that in the month of November 2014—over the course of just thirty days—5,042 people were killed by radical Islamists in 664 separate attacks across 14 countries. Fifty-one percent of the civilians murdered were Muslim, by the way. That's one death every eight minutes.

Today, we can say, as French president Francois Hollande did after the massacres last month, that “these fanatics have nothing to do with the Muslim religion”. We can say, as President Obama did at the recent National Prayer Breakfast, that ISIS has “hijacked” Islam. We can say until we're blue in the face that Islam is a religion of compassion, mercy, and peace.

And while all this is certainly true, it's [largely irrelevant](#) when across the planet vast numbers of Muslims support the enforcement of Sharia Islamic law. It's beside the point when hundreds of millions of Muslims world-wide believe that the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists [deserved](#) to be put to death, but are only sorry that their punishment for blasphemy was meted out by vigilantes instead of by a Shariah court.

It would be great if the crisis of ISIS was merely a fight waged by a “very few, marginalized yet extremely dangerous people,” as some have recently [claimed](#). It would be a relief if we only had to worry about a handful of jihadists involved in terrorism. But it's time that we stopped [living in denial](#). The first step to defeating Islamic radicalism is acknowledging that there is a problem.

My second point in that we need to recognize that this crisis is not just about religion.

ISIS and other radical Islamist groups view jihad as a religious duty. But it's important to realize that, even within the writings of the Salafists, the justification for deliberate attacks on civilians, especially those living in democracies, is quite recent. Curbs on harming noncombatants, found within both the Qur'an and Sunna, were shoved aside by Al Qaeda in an elaborate effort to rewrite the central tenets of a legitimate defensive jihad. Prior to the 1990s, even Sayyid Qutb and Ibn Wahhab didn't go around claiming that voters and taxpayers were legitimate targets because they acted as the enemy government's surrogate.

So today's radical Islamism represents an unprecedented re-interpretation of jihad. But the current crisis of is also about money and power, and marketing a message.

Terrorism is a big business and often a power play. The gruesome atrocities of ISIS are a useful way of siphoning off recruits from the competition—like Al Qaeda. As radical jihadist groups proliferate, we need to be doing more to exploit the competition and rivalries among them.

We should also be following the money trail. Hostage taking is a popular tactic because it ensures a ready stream of [cash](#) for the coffers, which ISIS and other extremist groups distribute as patronage.

And then there's the world wide web—where marginalized youth are able to translate their frustrations into acts of violence, with professed solidarity to terrorists halfway around the world.

Savvy recruiters mute people's ingrained moral sensibilities, what Harvard University's Steven Pinker [calls](#) the “better angels of our nature”. They brainwash impressionable people in a variety of places—in off-the-grid prayer halls and makeshift madrassas; on the killing fields of Syria and Yemen; in prison cells; and on Internet chat rooms, Facebook pages, and twitter feeds, where the planet's young are fed a steady diet of hate.

It's through images on the Internet, and on satellite TV too, that the latest news is framed as the latest outrage—Western armies ravaging, demoralizing, and humiliating Muslims. And this is absorbed on a daily basis.

Once upon a time, all Osama bin Laden had were grainy video tapes distributed by courier. Those days are long gone. Back in 2005 there were already over four thousand terrorist-related websites available on the Internet, an open university of jihad providing the theological justification to act violently in defense of Islam. Today, as recent [reports](#) document, ISIS uses the Internet to fine-tune a range of high-tech propaganda to different audiences around the globe.

We need to do a better job of countering these powerful messages. But we shouldn't bother trying to out-Twitter the radicals.

A new U.S. State Department social media initiative called “Think Again, Turn Away” that uses YouTube, Facebook and other social media platforms to try to convince young people that ISIS and Al Qaeda are bad has been rolled-out with considerable fanfare. So far it's been [a fiasco](#).

Instead, we should promote a counter-narrative through community-based programs that involve parents, teachers, religious, and community leaders working in groups and one-on-one to move potential killers toward non-violence. This is being done with some success in various European cities. There's also a new de-radicalization [pilot program](#) underway in Minneapolis.

It's also worth remembering that terrorists target the innocent so that the living will respond with harsh and punitive counter-measures. Radical Islamists would have a field day if we respond to their brutality with high levels of counter-violence, or if we curtail civil liberties at home and adopt draconian surveillance operations against our fellow Muslim citizens.

What could be better than the image of Europeans and Americans harassing their Muslim neighbors? This serves the cause—it supports the narrative, and helps recruitment.

My third point is that unless we empower moderate Muslims to address underlying grievances—the factors that gave rise to ISIS in the first place—we will soon face another permutation of ISIS.

In his 2005 inaugural address, former President George W. Bush said: “For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny, prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder, violence will gather and multiply in destructive power and cross the most defended borders and raise a mortal threat.”

He wasn't wrong.

Jihadist groups from ISIS to Boko Haram, al-Shabab, Hamas, the al Nusra Front, the Taliban, al Qaeda, and Ansar Beit al Maqdis have swept across a wide chunk of the Middle East, southeast Asia, and Africa because of poor governance.

All of these radical Islamist groups use horrible terrorist tactics, but they are more than terrorists. They're insurgents. They try to control territory—to be state-like. And they're also social service providers. Most present themselves as the only viable alternative to unjust and corrupt states. They mete out security and their version of justice when local governments are unable or unwilling to do so.

It's within this context of the failing or predatory state that sectarian Shi'ite-Sunni rifts and Iranian-Saudi rivalries are playing out. The growing strength of Iranian-backed Shia radicals (Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi in Yemen, and the Sadrists in Iraq) [incentivizes Sunni Arabs](#) to join radical groups like ISIS. Meanwhile Saudi-Arabia has long [supported](#) radical jihadists, bankrolling extremism in the region and beyond. Of course, both Iran and Saudi Arabia also terrorize their own people—as Lina Khatib of the Carnegie Middle East Centre rightly [notes](#), even as Saudi Arabia distances itself from ISIS their visions of justice are not all that different, and [Iran's brutalization](#) of its own people is legend.

Radical Islam in the Middle East and North Africa won't be defeated unless the underlying drivers of conflict are confronted: non-representative governments, under-development, and the increasing negative impacts of climate change.

But to do that, we're going to have to give moderate Muslims the help that they desperately need. As Lee Smith of the Hudson Institute recently [notes](#), rhetorical support by the White House and other Western policymakers is just cheap talk that leaves the field free to extremists.

My final point is that we have to stop blaming ourselves for radical Islam.

The notion that radical Islamist attacks are a reaction to provocations from the West is not only patently false, but also plays into the hands of extremists whose ideological underpinnings rest on the claim that Judeo-Christianity represses Islam.

In the month since the French terror attacks, a consensus seems to be emerging: we can best understand violence in the name of religion by addressing flawed integration. Europe's Muslim

immigrants, so the argument goes, haven't been well integrated, and this has produced alienation, resentment, and radicalization. "Multiculturalism has failed" rail the pundits.

But alleged European transgressions can't explain the religiously-motivated killings that happened last month in Paris—or that just occurred in [Copenhagen](#).

For one, there are many more successful integration stories than we think. Some of these are described in a fascinating new [book](#) by my Syracuse University colleague, geographer John Western, who paints a complex and ultimately optimistic portrayal of the experiences of first, second and third generation Muslim immigrants to Strasbourg.

For another, despite intense feelings of alienation, the willingness to act on them by committing monstrous acts of brutality is not the usual response. The notion that young French women are traveling to Syria to join ISIS because they're upset about the niqab ban, an argument made in a recent *New York Times* [op-ed](#), is absurd. Women don't wake up in the morning determined to bludgeon, shoot, or knife people who they don't know just because they don't like some law or state policy.

The typical [response](#) to France's veiling laws has not been mass murder, but mass protest. In non-violent demonstrations Muslim women raise banners and placards that reference French republican values—equality, women's rights, freedom of expression.

With few exceptions (the November 2005 Paris riots are one), for the most part France's Muslim citizens have channeled legitimate frustrations into legitimate democratic expressions.

For all the talk of a disenfranchised minority, the country's five million Muslims are fairly well integrated—and very French. Like all good democrats, they go to the polls and to the courts and join civil society organizations to champion their causes.

A great many also fully believe in the secular model and are sick and tired of the obsession over their religious affiliation and practices: dress codes, *halal* meat, and minarets.

The upshot is that integration policy failure is not a sufficient condition (to use social science lingo) for terrorism. Of course, this is not to say that more shouldn't be done to foster more inclusive societies. Economic discrimination in particular needs to be better addressed. A recent [study](#) shows that in France a Muslim job candidate is 2.5 times less likely to receive an interview than is her matched Christian counterpart.

But even here, simple explanations are [misleading](#). In fact, the data suggests that most terrorists enjoy relatively comfortable lives. Consider the [suspects](#) in a recently foiled Belgian terrorist plot (which forced a shutdown of the Jewish day schools throughout Brussels). Turns out few came from impoverished backgrounds.

Instead of violent extremism being the West's fault, terrorism is triggered by a particular framing of contemporary Muslim life as a combination of humiliations at home and militaristic policies abroad.

Take Amedy Coulibaly, the murderer of four Jews last month at the *Hyper Casher*. Coulibaly deliberately chose a kosher store in Paris' Porte de Vincennes—there was absolutely nothing random about it.

In a rambling monologue, captured on the supermarket's landline telephone, Coulibaly accused his hostages of paying with their taxes for France's war crimes. They should have evaded paying this money to the state, he told them. At one point in this bizarre diatribe, Coulibaly says that the Jews he targeted for murder—because they were Jewish—should have gone to “live in Israel”. Apparently, in his twisted mind, once France is rid of its Jews, they'll no longer be paying taxes to support the country's military campaigns.

Coulibaly's rants about France's war crimes are only the latest reminder of how deeply flawed the radical Islamist narrative really is. It's a narrative that will never acknowledge U.S. efforts to save Albanian Muslims in Kosovo from Slobodan Milosevic's brutality. Nor will it honor the 144 American servicemen who lost their lives in the Persian Gulf liberating Kuwaiti Muslims.

It is a narrative that ignores recent French sacrifices in northern Mali (from where, ironically, Coulibaly's own parents immigrated). French troops on the ground rescuing Muslims from Al Qaeda's reign of terror. Coulibaly can't even see it. Because he was blinded by a fierce anti-Americanism. Because he imagined himself to be resisting Western imperialism. Because he'd been brainwashed into believing that Western military power is always an evil to be uniformly resisted.

For Coulibaly it's the West that is bombing Muslims, and the citizens of these democracies who must be punished for it. But in reality it's Islamist zealots who are massacring Muslims (and everyone else who doesn't bend to their will).

To conclude, I'd like to do what Beth and Tim asked me to do: offer some remarks on violence in the name of religion from the Jewish perspective. As always, I take inspiration from my Rabbi. Here is what I learned from him:

The Torah tells us that when Adam and Eve went against the Lord G-d's command and ate from the Tree of Knowledge, Hashem called out to Adam and said:

וַיִּקְרָא יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהִים אֶל הָאָדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אַיֶּכָּה

[“Where are you?”]

Of course, as Rashi, the great medieval Torah commentator, tells us: G-d knows everything and knew exactly where Adam was. But he was giving Adam the chance to explain, to take responsibility, to speak up.

The Rabbis of the Gemara teach a similar message:

שתיקה כהודאה דמיא

[“Silence is agreement”].

In 2008, during an assault on the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai, Pakistan’s *Lashkar e-Taiba* terrorists took a detour—murdering a rabbi, his wife, and four others.

Yet the world was silent.

In 2012, a rabbi and three children were murdered in front of a Jewish school in Toulouse. But a million French didn’t march in the streets.

Last year, four visitors at the Jewish Museum in Brussels were killed.

A deafening silence.

And then in November, four rabbis were hacked to death while reciting the morning Amidah prayer in a west Jerusalem synagogue. Some celebrated in the streets. But most people of goodwill said nothing.

As Princeton University political theorist Michael Walzer recently [notes](#), perhaps today too many people of goodwill are more concerned with avoiding accusations of Islamophobia than they are with condemning Islamist zealotry.

The Anti Defamation League’s [Global 100 Index](#) shows that over a billion people on the planet see Jews as power-grabbing and money-grubbing, disloyal citizens in the countries in which they live and responsible for the terrible things that are done to them.

In Austria, anti-Semitic incidents nearly [doubled](#) last year. In Germany, a [third](#) of the public equates Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians with Nazi policies toward the Jews. This year, attacks on Jews have [doubled](#) in the London area.

The ADL survey shows that seventy-four percent of people in the Middle East and North Africa hold ‘persistent and pervasive’ anti-Jewish attitudes. A recent Pew Research Center poll [reports](#) similarly disturbing results: only two percent of people in Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan view Jews favorably; and the number only jumps to four percent in Turkey.

And in the United States, according to the FBI’s most recent statistics, 62 percent of all hate crimes motivated by religious-bias are [anti-Jewish](#).

What can I say: it's been a very tough year to be a Jew.

A week doesn't pass without hearing about some angry mob in some European city shouting "death to the Jews" and "Jews to the gas", defacing synagogues or [Jewish cemeteries](#) and bullying Jews on the streets.

Last month in Malmo, Sweden a non-Jewish reporter who went undercover wearing a *kippah* and a Star of David necklace found himself taunted and [attacked](#) by a mob. Apparently in many European cities today, 'walking while Jewish' is to put oneself at risk.

In December, a sheikh delivered an impromptu [sermon](#) in Islam's third holiest site—Jerusalem's *al-Aksa*—urging worshippers to 'slaughter the Jews'. A few weeks later, the call is answered: sixteen Jews were knifed on a bus.

On American campuses this year, anti-Semitic incidents are the new normal: [swastikas](#) painted on fraternity houses and students organizing [fundraisers](#) for convicted terrorists of, unbelievably, Jewish students. We have faculty on the West Coast [embracing Hamas](#) (which has a [founding charter](#) that reads like a Nazi screed) as a progressive movement of the Left. And we have faculty on the East Coast telling their students that they should wear anti-Jewish hatred as a [badge of honor](#). Meanwhile we have junior faculty who won't write anything even mildly sympathetic toward Israel out of [fear](#) that they'll be denied promotion and tenure.

One month ago in the City of Light six Jews going about their daily lives were murdered in cold blood: Yoav Hattab, Philippe Braham, Yohan Cohen, and Francois Michel Saada shot in a kosher supermarket; cartoonist George Wilkowski gunned down at *Charlie Hebdo*; and Elsa Cayat—the only woman killed at the satirical magazine. Other women there were spared, but Cayat was sentenced to death for being a Jew. *Zichronam L'vracha*—may their memories be for a blessing.

Seventy years after the liberation of Auschwitz [not much has changed](#) for the Jews.

This is the Jewish perspective.

Thank you.

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