Working Paper on

“Islamic Perception for the Remedial Solution to the Problem of Religious Extremism”

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Prepared by:

Prof. Dr. Ahmad bin Yousif al-Draiweesh

President, International Islamic University, Islamabad
In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful

All praise be to Allah, and peace and blessings be upon the noblest of the prophets and messengers, our prophet Muhammad, who has been sent as Mercy to the whole universe, his offspring and companions.

At the very onset of this august gathering, I warmly and cordially welcome all the guests to this august conference, more especially the distinguished guests from the United States of America, who have taken the pains to travel all along from the States to attend this program. I also thank the organizers of this important conference on this hot subject and at this specific time, since inter-faith and multi-cultural dialogue among diverse groups, civilizations and cultures and the followers of world religions has become a pressing need of the modern age, particularly in the backdrop of prevailing world tensions and the efforts of the extremists and radical groups both in the West and the Muslim world bent upon creating hatred, animosity and conflicts. There is no way to prevent them from achieving their sinister goals except through constructive dialogue, understanding and agreement on common values and ideals, brought to us by the heavenly religions and the Ibrahimic (Abrahimic) faith. All these call for mutual coexistence, security, peace and tranquility, love and mercy and human brotherhood, irrespective of race, color and religion and cooperation to achieve these ideals, respects of all the stakeholders for each other and finally to highlight the significance of the heavenly religions including Islam.

I would also like to thank the organizers of this conference, more especially my brother and colleague Dr. Mumtaz Ahmad, the Director of the Iqbal International Institute for Research and Dialogue and former Vice-President of the International Islamic University, Islamabad, for providing this rare opportunity to participate in this program through this brief paper entitled “Islamic Perception of Remedial Solution to Religious Extremism”. In view of the short span of time available for the presentation of this paper, I would like to focus briefly on the following two important issues:

1. The nature of extremism and its treatment from Islamic perspective, and
2. Dialogue and its wisdom and significance in Islam

In the treatment of these points, my focus will be on the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and the Traditions of the Prophet, peace be upon him, considering that these are the two perennial sources of Shari'ah, the divine Islamic law.

**The Nature of Extremism and Its Treatment:**

First of all, I would like to say something about Islam. Islam is a religion of moderation and golden means. It is a religion of perseverance, mercy and love. Due to its balanced and comprehensive teachings, it is applicable in every age and place. It has an elaborate legal system which is rational and practical. Islam is a religion of nature. It evens between all the creatures in rights and duties in accordance with its provisions and regulations. It maintains justice and equity without any discrimination. Islamic legal system ensures stability of life, contribution and sacrifice, continuous growth and progress, good and decent life for all.

I would like to emphasize on the outset that the phenomenon of extremism with its concomitant concepts and practices are completely alien to Islam. Islam has fought every form of extremism since the advent of the Prophet, peace be upon him. This is a phenomenon of which Islam has been accused falsely. If a few individuals calling themselves Muslims are found involved in such extremist practices, they cannot be said to represent Islam. Besides, you will be rather surprised if I say that the word ‘extremism’ as a definite term is foreign to our cultural and legal diction and has been forced into our cultural and legal literature from outside. If we go back to the original Islamic sources, we do not find any mention of the word ‘extremism’ in the sense in which it is being used today. Some scholars and researcher of Islamic law and culture have defined this term as ‘lack of moderation or exaggerating a certain point (of law) beyond the permissible limit.
This definition is consistent with the lexical meaning of the word. Linguistically, it suggests a tendency or inclination to drift away from a moderate view or the medium course. However, when the common man use this word now, he does not mean this; he rather understands by it exaggeration and exceeding the limit.

**Definition of Ghulu’ in Religion**

The word ghulu’ (exaggeration or excess) is used in the sense of exceeding the legal limit by over exaggeration. The jurists, therefore, define it as ‘exceeding the reasonable limit in (the interpretation or practice of a religious matter’.

Such extremism or exaggeration in religious matters is mostly the result of lack of proper understanding of a religious issue, or sheer ignorance, or blind following. This may also be caused by some political or social factors. Whatever the cause of such extremism, Islam has always fought against it since very early period. In view of its great danger, there are several explicit texts in the Qur’an and Sunnah (Traditions of the Prophet) that prohibit extremism. I shall mention a few of these proofs below:

Almighty Allah says:

وَلَا تَظْلِمُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلَّا مَا تَوَلَّا مِنْهُمْ وَاللَّهُ خَيْرٌ لِّلْمُلْكِ وَكَبِيرُ الرَّحْمَةِ

“O the people of the Scripture (this refers to the Christians and Jews), exaggerate not in your religion and nor utter aught concerning Allah except save the truth. The Messiah Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed to unto Mary, was only a Messenger of Allah and spirit for him. So believe in Allah and His messengers ...”

He also says,

كُلَّ نَفْسٍ أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا تَظْلِمُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ إِلَّا مَا تَوَلَّا مِنْهُمْ وَأَصْلَلُوا قُوَّمًا فَكَفَّارُهُمَا عَنْ سَأَرَاهَا وَأَصْلَلُوا عَهْدًا عَلَى النَّاسِ

“Say (O the Prophet) O the people of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion save what is truth and follow not the vain desires of the people who erred before and led many astray and erred from the straight path.”

This verse is directed to both Muslims and non-Muslims.

The Prophet, peace be upon him, said, “Beware of exaggeration in matters of religion; those before you perished due to exaggeration in religion.”

The Prophet also said, “Do not be harsh or severe to yourselves, less you are treated harshly; since the people who treated themselves harshly, they were treated harshly; their remnants are still in the hermitages and monasteries.”

In another tradition, he said, “The mutanatt’un are perished” three times. Mutanatt’un are those who exceed the limits in exaggerating an opinion or action.

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1 Qur’an 4: 171
2 Qur’an, 5: 77
3 Narrated by Abu Daud (Tradition No. 4904). However, Albani considers this tradition as weak and has mention in his Series of Weak Tradition on (3468)
Besides, the Prophet (pbuh) has ordered to fight against those who introduce, due to their exaggeration in the interpretation of religion, illegal practices such as killing of the innocent or those provided protection under the covenant.

Muslims unanimously hold that assault on innocent persons is *haram*, that is, forbidden legally and religiously. Such innocent person may be a Muslim. The killing of a Muslim or a physical assault on him is prohibited, except when he commits a crime requiring such punishment (that can be imposed only by a valid government). If a person kills such a Muslim without any fault of his, he commits a major sin. Almighty Allah says,

“*But whoever kills a believer intentionally - his recompense is Hell, wherein he will abide eternally, and Allah has become angry with him and has cursed him and has prepared for him a great punishment.*”

In another place, God said,

“*Because of that, We decreed upon the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land - it is as if he had slain mankind entirely*”.

As regards homicide of person who is protected under covenant (for instance a non-Muslim living in a Muslim state), the Prophet said,

“Whoever kills a confederate (whose life is guaranteed under the covenant, he shall not smell the fragrance of Paradise, though its fragrance can be smelt from a distance of forty years.”

Another tradition reports the Prophet saying,

“*أيما رحل أمن رحل على ذمة ثم تفقت، فالتقتل، فإن كان كافرًا*”

“What sort of man he is, that he gives protection to a man and then he kills him. I will absolve myself from the killer, even if the one killed is a disbeliever.”

This explains that if a Muslim ruler enters into a covenant with a non-Muslim, the life and property of the non-Muslim become protected and secured. It is not permissible for anyone to subject him to assault on his life and anyone who kills him shall be deprived of Paradise. This is certainly a very serious warning to a person who commits an assault on a person protected by a covenant.

This implies that anyone who obtains a guarantee of peace or security from a Muslim ruler, his life and property become fully secure.

These and similar other texts are very explicit evidence that fighting against exaggeration in religion, extremism, terrorism, perpetration of crimes and similar other acts is absolutely correct. It is not allowed to Muslim to commit such a crime in any condition, whatever may be the motives and justifications.

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4 Bukhari (Tradition No. 3166)
The Second Problem: Dialogue

Dialogue is an effective means of eliminating exaggeration and extremism, fighting against the criminal and terrorist acts resulted from such attitude, blocking all the extremist groups from achieving their sinister goals of fueling conflicts among different cultures and communities and followers of the world religions. This is also an issue settled in Islam. Both the Qur’an and the Sunnah have many categorical statements that suggest the legitimacy of dialogue. It is not possible to provide an exhaustive list of such categorical statements in a brief paper like this. Some of these Qur’anic verses have explicit commands to have dialogue, while some others refer to actual dialogues that have taken place between numerous prophets and their respective communities. There are still some other verses that include such commands and issues as cannot be performed or carried out without the application of dialogue. Let me enumerate some of the most obvious verses signifying this:

Almighty Allah says,

قَلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ كَمَّا سَوَاءَ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا تَشْرَكُوا مَعَ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَتَّخِذَا نَجْرًا مِّنْ ذُنُوبِهِنَّ فَإِنَّ تُولِيدَنَّكُمْ أَنْتُونََّا أَوْلِيَاءٌ مُّسْتَمِينُ

Say, "O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you - that we will not worship except Allah and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords instead of Allah." But if they turn away, then say, "Bear witness that we are Muslims [submitting to Him]." ⁵

This verse made it explicitly clear that the most important principle on which the dialogue with the people of the Scriptures should be based is the points that are common between us and them such as faith in Monotheism and the worship of one Almighty God.

This noble verse constitutes a permanent basis for dialogue between Muslims and the people of the Scripture – the Jews and the Christians. Thus Islam invites all – Muslims, Jews and Christian - to the beliefs and faith which are common in the teachings of all the prophets and messengers of Allah and which are not exclusive to any one in particular. This approach of Islam for developing a mutual understanding of each other is rather the most balanced and justified that one can hardly dispute or challenge.

In another verse of the Qur’an (Chapter al-Ankabut:46) stresses on holding dialogue for mutual understanding starting from the common grounds. The Almighty God says,

وَلَا تَحَادَّلوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالْبَيْنِ الْمَعْرُوْفِ مِنْهُمْ وَقُولُوا أَنْتُونََّا مِنْ ذُنُوبِهِنَّ الْمُسْتَمِينُ

And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice among them, and say, "We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. And our God and your God is one; and we are Muslims [in submission] to Him."

This verse shows beyond doubt that the best method of preaching the religion is holding dialogue and debate in a manner that is kindest.

Thus dialogue fulfils the legal objective of communicating the eternal message of Islam to the whole world, since it is, as a Muslim believe, the universal religion for the entire humankind and not

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5 Al-Nisa 3: 64
6 Al-Ankabut 29:46
only from Muslims, as the Holy Qur’an has declared in the most unequivocal term that the Prophet Muhammad has been sent for the whole world. The Almighty Allah said, “I have not sent you but as a Mercy for the whole universe.”

And We have not sent you but to the entire mankind as a bringer of good tidings and a warner. However, most of the people do not understand.

Besides, the Almighty Allah has explained in the Holy Qur’an that creation of man into male and female and nations and tribes is merely to enable them to know each other and interact among them. To this effect, God says,

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is All-Knowing and Acquainted.

Apart from this, the Qur’an stresses on justice and equity while dealing with different communities in the following words,

And do not let the hatred of a people who have obstructed you from al-Masjid al-Haram cause you to transgress. And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression.

“...there has certainly come to you a Messenger from among yourselves. Grievous to him is what you suffer; [he is] concerned over you and to the believers he is kind and merciful.

There are many Prophetic traditions – both verbal and actual – that approve the legitimacy of dialogue with the non-Muslims for the purpose of exchange of ideas. The Prophet himself held dialogue with the people of the Scriptures and others even through correspondence. He wrote to the emperor Hercules thus, “In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, and the Merciful. This is an epistle from Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah to Hercules, King of Rome. Peace be upon he who follows the Guidance. Listen, I hereby call you to the Message of Islam. Accept Islam, you will get peace. Accept it, Allah will doubly reward you. But if you turn away, you will be responsible for the sin (disbelief) of Alerisian as well. (O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you - that we will not worship except Allah and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords instead of Allah.” But if they turn away, then say, "Bear witness that we are Muslims [submitting to Him.”

7 Al-Anbia: 107
8 Saba: 28
9 Al-Hujurat: 13
10 Al-Ma’idah: 2
11 Al-Tawbah: 128
12 Narrated by Imam Bukhari (Tradition No. 2941)
Sometimes, the Prophet, peace be upon him, had dialogue with the people of the Scriptures including the Christian of Najran in the form of direct conversation and discussion with their delegates which came to the Prophet to discuss about his new faith.

Once the Prophet remarked about the treaty in which he participated actively which was concluded in the house of Jad’an by saying. “I would not prefer to have even a great wealth in lieu of this treaty. And if I am invited to participate in this treaty even in Islam, I would certainly make a positive response.”

This treaty was concluded to provide help and rescue to those subjected to oppression. This was in complete harmony with the objective of Shari’ah, the Divine law of Islam. The dialogue is, therefore, a lofty ideal in order to seek cooperation on the common denominator and interests that we share with other communities. There is hardly any community in the world with which we do not share some common values and interest which may provide the foundation for mutual cooperation to work for the common interest and welfare of both the communities.

The inter-cultural and inter-civilizational dialogue with other communities provide an opportunity not only for the discussion of the matters of mutual interest, but also a viable forum to introduce Islam, its basic tenets, teachings and legal injunctions. A serious study of the history of Islam and that of the Islamic Da’wah (missionary) will discover that Islam has benefited tremendously from dialogue in the dissemination of its perennial message among the people. If we have a look at the number of Muslims today and how they were won over to Islam, we will realize that the absolute majority of the present Muslims were converted as a result of dialogue and peaceful preaching and not due to any coercion or sword. The most glaring examples are the peaceful mass conversion to Islam in the South East Asia, the Indian sub-continent and the Central Asia.

Islam is a religion based on reason and logical and rational proofs. That is why it does not only believe in dialogue and debate as a means to advance its divine message, but also encourages people to use it as a method of persuasion and convincing people of the superiority of Islam as a religion. Throughout the history, both ancient and modern, the cultural and civilizational dialogue has always proved predominantly favorable to Islam. In its early days, when it was still passing through a critical period of persecution at the hand of the Quraish, Islam, as told by our learned scholars, made unparallel success in winning the heart of the common Arabs, after the treaty of Hudaybiyyah conclude between the Prophet and the Quraish as a result of peaceful dialogue between the Prophet, peace be upon him, and Suhail bin Amr, notwithstanding some of its conditions seemingly humiliating which caused the Muslims great anguish and reluctance to acquiesce to the treaty, but which ultimately proved the very cause of its great success and expansion. The conversion of people to Islam during the next two years subsequent to the treaty surpassed the total number of conversion during the past one decade.

One of the prominent historical evidence of the supremacy of Islam through dialogue, peaceful persuasion and cultural interaction is the mass conversion of the Mongols and Tartars who came as invaders and conquerors of the land of Islam. They did not simply embrace Islam, but some of their kings even devoted themselves to the preaching of Islam. This happened in the Sub-continent and some other countries.

Some of the events in modern times also point to this fact. Islam has stressed the importance of using such forum of dialogue and persuasion even in the worst condition of war, which shows its keen interest to the extent of not missing a single opportunity of mutual discussion and debate. The almighty Allah says,

13 Narrated by Baihaqi in his Sunan. (Tradition No. 13461)
“And if any one of the polytheists seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the words of Allah. Then deliver him to his place of safety. That is because they are a people who do not know.”

Some of these opportunities for dialogue and meetings between Muslims and the followers of other faiths and cultures led to great achievements of Islam in term of number of conversion both in ancient and modern ages through this channel of dialogue. This enables the Muslims to seize such opportunities to explain their beliefs which helped in clarifying doubts and confusions and removing misunderstanding and hostilities.

In addition to the above, we Muslims value such dialogue and debate in order to explain to the people that Islam is not only for the Arabs and the present Muslims, but also for the entire humankind. It has come for the betterment of man in every walk of life and realization of his worldly and religious objectives and welfare. We also need such dialogue to exonerate Islam from the false accusations leveled against it such as it is a religion of murder, terrorizing people, creating fasad, moral corruption, depravation and disregard for human lives and souls. On the contrary, Islam has come to preserve and protect five essentials of man; religion, life, intellect, purity of lineage and property. To this end, Islam has prescribed stringent punishment for the breach of rules causing damage to any of the five necessities.

We are part of the global community and as such we cannot isolate ourselves under the present media and communication revolution due to which the world has shrunk to a single village or rather to a single room. We are influenced by what is going on in this world and we also influence the world. We have a noble mission and that is to work for the betterment and welfare of humankind, to call them to good and righteousness and to cooperate with our non-Muslim fellows in everything that is good for mankind and consistent with the principles of Islamic Shari'ah and its lofty goals and objectives.

I will once again draw your attention to the clarion call of the Qur’an enshrined in the verse,

And do not let the hatred of a people who have obstructed you from al-Masjid al-Haram cause you to transgress. And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression.

He also said,

There has certainly come to you a Messenger from among yourselves. Grievous to him is what you suffer; [he is] concerned over you and to the believers is kind and merciful.

In this noble verse of the Qur’an, God commands us to uphold justice and equity even with the enemies and to cooperate only on what is good and righteousness.

Cultural dialogue highlights human dignity and humanism, links man to other communities and cultures, reduces tensions and conflicts, and alleviate its negative consequences and implications. Such a conflict is mostly due to the ignorance of the reality of Islam. Cultural dialogue, if it follows

14 Al-Tawbah: 6
15 Al-Ma‘idah:2
16 Al-Tawbah: 128
correct approach and methodology, is an urgent requirement to clarify and present the true image of the beliefs, etiquette and legal provisions of Islam. It is also, as already mentioned, an effective means of persuading the followers of other religions to accept Islam. Islamic da’wah is directed to every person and persuasion to the Truth is the legitimate and desired goal.

Besides, there is a problem to be solved and tackled through peaceful, meaningful and scientific dialogue. This is the differences and conflict in the perceptions, visions, judgment and practical approaches amongst various Islamic parties and factions; each party and group considers itself on the right path and the other on the wrong. Not only this, but it looks to itself as an exclusively possessor of the truth. Can there be a greater illusion than this?

There must be a remedy to this predicament so that common sense prevails among the Muslims and they return to the pristine and eternal teachings of Islam, its puritan faith and liberal laws through dialogue as we have already mentioned.

I, therefore, lay great emphasis on the importance of pursuing dialogue amongst world cultures and civilizations and followers of religions and schools of thought with conflicting views and ideologies. It is pertinent to point out that we, in the International Islamic University, Islamabad, through its Iqbal International Institute of Dialogue and Research and other educational units, are fully prepared to cooperate with any scientific, educational, cultural and ideological quarter, from within or without, to hold serious and meaningful dialogue for the overall interest of the entire humankind in general and for the interest of this good community in particular.

The pleasure of the Almighty Allah is our sole purpose.

Rendered into English by: Abulwara M.N. Khan