

Countering Islamic State Ideology: Voices of Singapore Scholars edited by Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Rohan Gunaratna, with a Foreword by Karen Armstrong, Singapore: Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas), 2021, \$25, pp. 152

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People often complain that Islamic scholars do little more than condemn the inhuman acts of so-called jihadist groups and fall short of delivering strong, incontrovertible rebuttals against the vicious narratives of terrorist groups, like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS). It has also been stated that the ever-rearing Hydra-like heads of terrorism will have to be endlessly severed until genuine Islamic scholarship drains the very swamp of irreligious radicalism from which the monstrosity continually raises new and ugly distortions.

Conversely, there is also the view that even the incipient work done by Islamic scholars across the globe against radical indoctrination has still not received due recognition and coverage in the global media. Even countries running major counter-radicalisation campaigns around the world—who have initiated community outreach programmes, legislative and prison reforms, even disengagement and rehabilitation measures—have largely refrained from launching major counter-narrative campaigns. Thus, the very source of radicalism, namely, the virulent extremist message, has mostly gone unchallenged in what is essentially a major ideological war of the twenty-first century.

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Setting this anomaly right to a great extent is the singularly exceptional ‘Singapore model’. With its path-breaking institutions of Islamic scholarship, mainly the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas), the Lion City has clearly taken the lead in religiously discrediting the ideological vermin of jihadist indoctrination and propaganda. The most recent of its delectable fruits is the book, *Countering Islamic State Ideology: Voices of Singapore Scholars*, which delivers religious counterpoints to the main conceptual themes of the IS in order to stop young, impressionable minds from joining the IS and other jihadist groups.

In this edited volume, teaming up with counter-radicalisation experts, Islamic scholars (*asatizah* in Arabic) from Singapore deliver withering rebuttals to most of the insidious arguments in the IS’ narrative structure. Edited by acclaimed counter-radicalisation analyst Professor Rohan Gunaratna and noted Islamic scholar Muhammad Haniff Hassan, the book takes an important step towards filling the lacuna in the field of counter-narratives, a sore spot poignantly noted in the introductory chapter: ‘The centre of gravity of the (jihadist) threat is ideological, the Achilles heel of the western-centric counter terrorism model.’

The strength of these edited essays lies in its careful selection of IS’ narrative themes, written by accredited Islamic scholars and experts in that field, who are adept at dealing with strategic terminologies in the English language as comfortably as they deal with the minutiae of classical Islamic jurisprudence. Every chapter of this scholarly tour de force hones in on a particular catchphrase or distorted concept in the IS’ strategic meta-narrative, which is then meticulously deconstructed and is generally effectively invalidated by citing authentic references from Islamic scriptures and classical canonical literature (including the Quran, *Ahadeeth*, life of Prophet and other classical sources of Islamic jurisprudence). The 22 chapters of the book deal with almost all of the key IS’ propositions, including the false claim that militant jihad is *fard al-ayn* (mandatory injunction for all Muslims, whereas orthodox jurisprudence calls it *fard al-kifayah*—injunction of war declared by ruler only when facing existential threat); its methodology of *takfeer* (legitimising slaughter of people after declaring them infidels); its call to *hijrah* (the injunction to migrate to IS-held territories); its distortion of *al wala al bara* (religious ideal of ‘loyalty and disavowal’); justification of *istishhad* (suicide attack, which finds no precedent in Islamic history); misrepresentation of *inghimas* (self-immersion into enemy ranks); its

untenable use of *naskh* (abrogation of Quranic verses related to peace and those forbidding indiscriminate violence); the revival of slavery (although Islam championed their freedom and made many of them kings); and many more.

Opening the discourse here is Karen Armstrong, the celebrated British author on religion, who in her 'Foreword' enunciates the purpose of the book:

IS is no more authentically Islamic than the Ku Klux Klan is genuinely Christian, but many Western people have come to believe that its policies are decisive proof that Islam is addicted to violence, even though leading Muslim authorities have deplored both its conduct and ideology in the strongest terms. This new book will further explore traditions and writings that will counter this misperception.

At the outset, the book presents the key concepts of the IS' ideology—its core beliefs, its creed, its stated goals, even its historical origins. This is an important first step because it can only deliver counter-narratives after first studying the terrorist narrative in depth. The book then launches its clinical analysis by launching its tirade against IS' diabolic mobilisation campaign that depends heavily on its invocation to the youth to migrate to its territories against the laws of their states, the will of their parents and persuasion of their family members. In this essay, Muhammad Haniff Hassan is quite convincing in the way he discredits IS' interpretation of the Islamic term *hijrah* (migration), which refers to the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Madinah, but has been stolen by the IS' for its siren-like call to migrate to its lands.

The essay makes the pertinent argument that unlike IS, the Prophet never declared jihad as *fard al-ayn* even when he ruled Madinah. He did not exhort Muslims to migrate to his city-state even when two of the holiest sites in Islam—the Kaabah in Mecca and Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem—were not under his rule. The scholar then cites the well-known story of the Yemeni migrant Uwais Al Qarni in Hadeeth literature and asks why did the Prophet accord him the status of a *Sahabi* (companion), even though Uwais never met the Prophet, for he had to abort his migration to Madinah in order to tend to his blind and ailing mother. The story delivers a strong counter to the IS' call to youngsters to pay no heed to the plea of parents and families, whom they leave behind to migrate to the terror group's territories.

In another chapter, Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mustazah Bahari de-mythify the ‘black flag’ imagery deviously appropriated by the IS. By exploiting esoteric references found in Hadeeth literature classified as *dhaeef* (belonging to a weak narrative chain that purportedly culminates to a statement by the Prophet), the IS purposely designed black flags for itself and then claimed that it is the prophesized army of Al Mahdi bearing ‘the black banners’. The Hadeeth literature in this prophecy is very vague in its details and speaks of a group bearing black flags emerging from Khurasan—the region covering north-eastern Iran, southern Turkeministan and northern Afghanistan (and not IS that has emerged out of the Levant)—in order to fight the evil forces of the mythical Dajjal (Anti-Christ) before the end of the world. The chapter also exposes IS’ other devious attempts at gaining credibility through vague eschatological misinterpretations, including its capture of the small and strategically irrelevant hamlet of Dabiq in the early years of its expansion in Syria, just because it is a supposedly prophesised site in an ambiguous Hadeeth reference about a battle that ushers in Armageddon (Al Malhama Al-Kubra).

The controversial issue of abrogation of Quranic verses, particularly those extolling peace and setting restrictions on violence in times of war, such as prohibition against targeting of non-combatants (women, children, the elderly, the priestly class, cattle, crops, fruit-bearing trees, etc.), has also been effectively defended in this book. The proper understanding of the ‘Sword Verse’ (Quran’s Surah 9, Verse 5) in the context of the Treaty of Hdaybiyyah is recommended reading for both Muslims and non-Muslims, as this issue generally causes a lot of confusion regarding Islam’s defensive approach towards war. Similar erudition is on display in dispelling IS’ misrepresentation of the concept of *al wala al bara* (loyalty and disavowal) and the perversion behind its carrying out attacks in the blessed month of Ramadan.

However, the most striking refutation from a strategic perspective comes in the essay that disproves IS’ dubious analogy of suicide bombing with a religious licence for *inghimas*. The essay clearly demonstrates how the analogy is classified by most Islamic jurists as a case of ‘*al-qiyasma’ a al-fariq*’ (an analogy between two dissimilar things). The counter-argument demolishes the defence for suicide bombing by equating *inghimas* with modern commando operations, wherein there is always a chance for avoiding deaths and where such operations could be for the purpose of sabotage only. It clearly exposes IS’ deliberate attempt

at confusing *inghimas* with suicide bombing operations (which IS itself terms differently as '*amliyat al istishhadiyya*'), which Islamic scholar deem as forbidden. Thus, the essay states:

The impermissibility of suicide bombing arises not only from the immorality of the act itself, but also from the wickedness of killing civilians. This is in line with established legal maxims in Islamic jurisprudence that '*al-wasaillaha abkam al-maqasid*' (a means takes the same ruling of its objective [if the objective is impermissible, the means used to achieve it becomes impermissible too]) and '*al-ghayah la tubarrir al-wasilah*' (an end does not justify the means). (p. 92)

The book is replete with such hidden gems, and even new religious insights, that disprove IS' justifications for barbarity and provide correct understanding of Islam to both Muslims and non-Muslims, 'coupled with the promotion of moral and humane values'. The only issue here is that these counter-narratives appear too scholarly and may not appeal to the young and impressionable who are driven more by passionate and emotional intensity than by legal casuistry. The book has credibility because its authors are accredited Islamic scholars, but it lacks in Aristotelian 'pathos', which is considered more persuasive than either the 'logos' (the logical argument) or the 'ethos' (the credibility of the messenger). One wonders whether these counters could be turned into crisp, deliverable strategic messages across a variety of mediums—social media, websites, videos, public forums—and be incorporated in educational syllabi of seminaries. The leaves of this book need to fly in public discourse and should not be bookended by the many ignored volumes on a library shelf. In any case, this is one great academic accomplishment of immense value and merit.