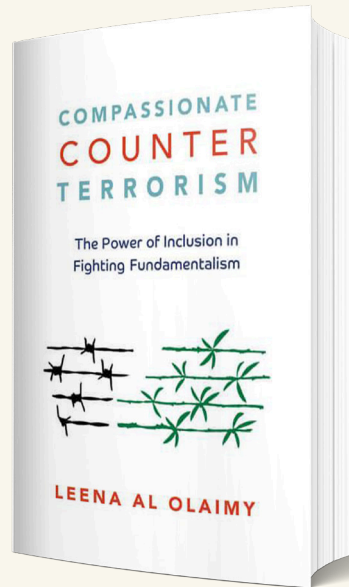التَّحَالُف الإسلامي العَسْكَرِي لِمُحَارَبَةِ الإرهَاب
**ISLAMIC MILITARY COUNTER TERRORISM COALITION**

**BOOK REVIEW 20**

COMPASSIONATE
COUNTER
TERRORISM

The Power of Inclusion in
Fighting Fundamentalism

**LEENA AL OLAIMY**

# COMPASSIONATE COUNTERTERRORISM:

## THE POWER OF INCLUSION IN FIGHTING FUNDAMENTALISM

**LEENA AL OLAIMY**

## Book Review

Monthly Issue - Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition

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**Book Review**

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## Compassionate Counterterrorism:
### The Power of Inclusion in Fighting Fundamentalism

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**Drawing** on interdisciplinary research from diverse fields and sectors like the military, academia, neuroscience, social psychology, and business, this book's central premise is that while the leaders of terrorist organizations may be ideologically driven, those who join are not. Therefore, a long-term approach to counterterrorism must address the underlying grievances attracting individuals to the path of militancy and extremism. Terrorist groups like Daesh are adept at exploiting perceptions of economic inequality, social exclusion, and political bias—investing hundreds of hours into radicalizing just one individual.

## IN-DEPTH INVESTIGATION AND METICULOUS ANALYSIS

Leena Al Olaimy, terrorism researcher and sustainable development expert, provides an incisive analysis of the temptations and decoys presented by terrorist organizations to appeal to prospective recruits. The author builds on these "selling points" to construct a persuasive argument demonstrating how militaries, governments, and the private sector can invest in preventative counterterrorism measures that achieve durable peace: one that transcends the mere absence of conflict and violence.

Military interventions have led to the demise of just 7 percent of terrorist organizations since 1968. While the author is careful not to argue against hard security approaches, the book invites policy makers to embrace a broader view of security and offers innovative and unconventional strategies that have proven far more effective than military interventions alone.

The book is divided into three parts and includes a preface outlining the author's personal experiences with terrorism and violent extremism. Since the author intends to reach a general readership beyond academics and topical specialists, the first two parts of the book lay the necessary groundwork for the author's primary thesis. That is; in order to provide a long-term solution to counterterrorism, interventions must humanize the problem through addressing the underlying socio-economic and political conditions that are conducive to breeding terrorism. First, Olaimy covers the history of Islam and the Middle East in Part I—in as so much is necessary for context. Subsequently, Part II explores the commonly cited drivers of terrorism through the lens of social, economic and political exclusion. Olaimy connects the data and narratives in Part II, with the more solutions-oriented Part III of this book.

## CONCEPT OF TERRORIST AND ASSOCIATED CRIMES

The first part of the book falls into three chapters. In **Chapter 1** 'Who Is the Terrorist?' the author frames the controversies surrounding the definitions of terrorism and covers a brief historical overview of the major turning points for terrorism, and how perceptions of terrorism have changed over time. Nelson Mandela (Nobel Peace Laureate, 1993), for instance, remained on the US terrorism watch list until 2008. Olaimy proceeds with posing thought-provoking questions around the stated intention of violence versus the act itself. This chapter also discusses state-sponsored terrorism versus non-state actors, and leaves the reader with thought-provoking questions around the biased standards applied to both the actors and acts of violence; concluding that we value some lives less than others.

**Chapter 2** concisely condenses the 1,400-year history of Islam. Unlike research that either demonizes the religion of Islam entirely, or completely disregards the role of religion, the author provides a more nuanced analysis. Using examples such as the constitution of Medina (the Medina Charter)—which was considerably more progressive than Western early twentieth-century laws—the author makes the argument that current radical Islamist ideologies are rooted in contemporary political issues rather than pure theology.

**Chapter 3** summarizes the history of the modern Middle East, the colonization of Arab countries following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and covert modern-day imperialism. The author uses this chapter to highlight the significance of moral outrage and the failures of Arab nationalism and socialism, combined with the Muslim world's social, political, and economic ills, and the exploitation of extremist movements for such favorable circumstances.

## DANGER OF IGNORANCE AND EXCLUSION

The second part consists of five chapters. in Chapter Four, Al-Olaimy distinguishes between sympathizers of extremist movements, and shows that many terrorists lack religious knowledge. Many terrorists lack religious literacy; detained Boko Haram militants see the Quran for the very first time, in prison. Military research and multilateral studies revealed that just 16 percent of foreign fighters travelling to join Daesh believed in the idea of establishing an Islamic state or caliphate in the Levant. Moreover, younger Daesh are driven by a duty to defend their "in-group" in Syria rather than by religion.

Delineating the role of both economic exclusion and economic inequality, **Chapter 5** shows how terrorist groups exploit both. In the Al Qaeda legacy playbook The Management of Savagery (also used by Daesh) Abu Bakr Naji, one of Al Qaeda's chief strategists outlines his plan to lure the impoverished with financial rewards. Bin Laden's purchasing power could once buy him an army of 15,000 soldiers. The author notes that unemployment is a factor in economic inequality. Nigeria, where unemployment ranges between 42 and 74 percent, is a breeding ground for terrorism. With such economic realities for those lacking access to opportunities, it is easy to see how organizations like Daesh, which had accumulated more than US$2 billion in wealth at one point, was able to present a utopia; promising recruits tax-free salaries, cars, homes, food, healthcare, municipal services, and even matrimonial matchmaking services.

This, the author notes, is where excessive military force can have unintended consequences; by weakening fragile governments and providing fertile ground for lawlessness and mass mobilized terrorism. This sets in motion a reinforcing cycle of violence and economic decline. Economic development, on the other hand, expands a new middle class incentivized by the self-interest of maintaining peace, thereby refusing terrorists the space in which to operate.

Unlike their developing counterparts, Western home-grown terrorists tend to represent dominant immigrant groups that face economic exclusion or inequality. In France, immigrant unemployment rates were almost double the nonimmigrant rate in 2013, and a Christian citizen is 2.5 times more likely than a Muslim citizen with the same qualifications to get called for a job interview. The correlation between economic inequality—both perceived and real—and violent extremism, is closely interfaith. Nazis scapegoated the Jews following Germany's humiliating World War I defeat. While more recently, the term alt-right first emerged in November 2008, which was also the year of the worst global financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Far right groups in the US intentionally recruit from economies in decline, like Detroit.

**Chapter 6** provides compelling evidence on the impact of social exclusion and the lack of social integration in driving violent extremism. Olaimy debunks the "clash of civilizations" hypothesis; why are Moroccan immigrant communities in Europe problematic, while Morocco ranks 122 on the Global Terrorism Index and is among the countries

categorized as suffering no impact from terrorism?

In-depth research studying 2,032 foreign fighters found that prospective recruits are primarily identity seekers, and secondarily status seekers. The author argues that the primal human need for belonging and the amplified feeling of power is what drives many recruits. It is therefore not surprising that 70 percent of the foreign fighters who left their countries to fight in Daesh territories are immigrants coming from specific subculture communities in the West. Whereas, 41 percent of homegrown jihadists in the West also come from these subcultural enclaves. Discrimination against people who are struggling to culturally assimilate increases risks of radicalization.

Beyond a shadow of doubt, the global community grapples with the dilemma of ISIS returnees; the author contends that denationalization is the most extreme form of social exclusion. In addition to dispersing a relatively contained problem internationally, denationalization also limits options for humane and legal redress.

## CHANGE BY VIOLENCE AND TERRORIZATION

**Chapter 7** provokes the reader to wonder: could I turn to violent extremism given a confluence of circumstances? Chapter 7 draws on various social psychology studies like the Stanford prison experiment and the Milgram electric shock experiment. The author illustrates the influence of situationism and challenges the reader's moral overconfidence and correspondence bias. This bias is what leads one to believe that people do bad things because they are bad people; whereas in committing those same acts, one must be doing so for a justified reason.

Olaimy argues that many terrorists—including the likes of Osama Bin Laden—did not lack empathy, rather they were driven by it. However, their empathy was discriminate for their in-group. It is this prejudice that best predicts intergroup violence. As terrorist groups experienced increasing empathy for the suffering of their in-group (Iraqis during the Gulf War and thereafter, Palestine, Israeli offensives in Lebanon in 1982 etc.), this increased their willingness to inflict harm on members of their out-group.

Moreover, in both committing and countering acts of terrorism (and other acts of politically motivated violence), both sides often inadvertently mirror and propagate what they are fighting. Giving documented

examples of horrific torture and sexual abuse at Guantanamo Bay, the author questions whether counterterrorism has become terrorism by another name. All forms of violent extremism seek change through fear and intimidation rather than through peaceful means. Should we, then, consider all those who seek change through fear and intimidation rather than through peaceful means to be violent extremists?

**Chapter 8** provides an in-depth examination of the unintended consequences of military force in countering terrorism. "Missiles may kill terrorists. But good governance kills terrorism" is the key message of this chapter.

Historically, military force led to the demise of only 7 percent of terrorist groups overall. Olaimy argues that re-allocating a portion of defense budgets into prevention and "soft power" diplomacy such as development, would yield better results. For example, although military operations weakened Boko Haram and Daesh in 2015, both groups subsequently dispersed into more territories and ultimately increased global levels of terrorism. Moreover, when over 700 former recruits were interviewed in terrorist hotbeds on the African continent, 71 percent attributed "government action" including "killing of a family member or friend" or "arrest of a family member or friend," as the catalyst for joining terrorist groups. In contrast, studies in Nigeria indicate that the mere visibility of USAID programming correlated with decreased levels of support for Boko Haram.

Olaimy acknowledges the unenvious gravity of decisions that governments and security forces must make, but advocates for a broader systems analysis that considers the unintended consequences of interventions, particularly in an environment where groups like Daesh adeptly exploit and actively sow polarization between "true" Muslims and non-Muslims; something they call "Eliminating the Gray Zone".

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND EXTREMISM

Part III falls into five chapters. In **Chapter 9**, the author strongly warns against the division of religion into good and bad, and believes that this contributes to the continuation of polarization without developing a correct understanding of Islam and Islamic values that undermine the foundations of violent extremism. However, through examples of peace practitioners and former extremists who have used

the Quran to successfully eliminate extremism, successful "deradicalization" practitioners like Dr. Fatima Akilu and Basit Jamal intentionally avoid tit-for-tat retaliatory debates with violent extremists and instead focus on teaching the Quran within its historical context, its congruence of values with other world religions, and its allegories encouraging compassion, forgiveness, and kindness as the pathway to paradise.

Imams should also view themselves as facilitators rather than didactic teachers and should invite critical inquiry; this would significantly decrease the likelihood of individuals outsourcing their humanity and moral responsibility to leaders of terrorist organizations. Furthermore, the author emphasizes that radicalism (without violence) in and of itself is not destructive; many spiritual and visionary leaders were considered radical in their time.

**Chapter 10** examines the dynamics of political participation in decreasing violent extremism. Reaching a political settlement is one of two primary ways in which terrorist groups end. Examples include The Good Friday Agreement between Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the UK; and the Chapultepec Peace Accords in El Salvador.

Nevertheless, by allowing extremist groups to participate in the political sphere, this allows them to publicly fail and dismantles any idealized and aspirational notions of what they will do when in power. Indonesia—home to the world's largest Muslim population—became more religious, while decreasing support for violent extremism, partially because Islamist blocs were not immune to political scandals. Constituents were more interested in good governance rather than Islamic governance.

Equally important, if not more essential, is the political participation of youth—who form the backbone of many para-military and terrorist organizations, and are literally willing to die for a cause. Their energy must be redirected from the exploitations of terrorist groups. This means providing them with meaningful outlets to voice their opinions and contribute to public reform. Successful examples of political engagement include the global campaign "NOT TOO YOUNG TO RUN" which advocates for reducing the minimum age requirements for political office. Other youth-led initiatives include Pakistani human rights activist Gulalai Ismail, who began training and mobilizing the political engagement of young women at just 16 years of age. The work of such organizations and initiatives is deeply impaired, if not totally incapacitated—by military or state violence.

**Chapter 11** describes the ways in which community organizations and urban municipalities have studied these tactics and applied counter strategies to ensure vulnerable youth are socially integrated and don't fall prey to terrorist organizations. It is widely known that Daesh invests hundreds of hours into recruiting just one individual and exclusion is a prerequisite for radicalization.

Successful examples include the European city of Mechelen where not one single person was successfully recruited by Daesh—despite having the largest Muslim population in Belgium and being located between the former ISIS hotbeds of Brussels and Antwerp. Since 9/11, Mechelen's Mayor has invested in preventative measures that strengthen social cohesion. Urban renewal and revitalization projects have upgraded rundown neighborhoods and promoted class-based integration between immigrants.

In Kyrgyzstan, one community organization learned that militant groups engage recruits with three simple promises: a just society, a sense of belonging, and equality for the disenfranchised. Consequently, they invest more than 1,500 hours to identify the 3 to 4 percent of youth who are most at

risk of violent radicalization. The process includes grassroots dialogue to reveal grievances, followed by an analysis of the rhetoric used by terrorist groups to recruit. At-risk youth are engaged using these promises of justice, equality, and belonging through meaningful work. Consequently, they begin to self-identify through their altruism and social work, as opposed to notoriety.

Such initiatives are also applied with prison inmates in Malaysia and Indonesia, where detainees jointly engage in community service in slums and orphanages with members of law enforcement; redefining the meaning of being a good Muslim and developing whole of society bonds that cultivate empathy.

In Germany, youth extremist prison programs that emphasize cultivating empathy, demonstrate recidivism rates of 30 percent, compared with 80 percent for all juvenile offenders in Germany. Correspondingly, neuroscientific research at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences by Tania Singer, detected structural changes to the brain in MRI scans after just one week of training on mindfulness, compassion, and perspective taking.

## PITFALLS OF TREATMENT APPROACHES AND PROGRAMMES

**Chapter 12** analyzes Daesh's business model and argues that economic development-based interventions have successfully stymied terrorist recruitment when implemented correctly. Daesh presents the following value proposition to target different fighter segments: Financial incentives; Community and belonging; Meaningful purpose; Religious purification; Adventure and status.

Grievances related to the aforementioned—such as a lack of economic opportunity or lack of belonging—are exacerbated by military force that exclusively focuses on annihilating targets. Repercussions of such forces include weakening economies, aggravating socio-economic tensions, and loss of civilian life. While the terrorist group may be militarily weakened, the grievances that drive others towards joining those groups—and new terrorist groups that may emerge—are amplified.

Social and economic development policies can weaken local support for terrorist activities and discourage terrorist recruits. However, such programs must avoid the following pitfalls:

1. Inadequately funded social and economic development policies are likely to renew support for terrorism by inflating the expectations of such programs.

2. Impartial access to programs—either intentional or unintentional due to infrastructure for example—widen inequality and amplify perceptions of discrimination.

3. Failure to consult local stakeholders and apply a multi-stakeholder approach can breed mistrust, and allows for a misuse of funds in favor of investor returns rather than community needs.

4. Development policies must contribute to the socio-economic classes that lend support to terrorists to incentivize them with economic benefits of peace; consequently inhibiting local support for terrorist activities.

Yet the perpetual challenge impeding the scale and impact of organizations working to prevent violent extremism (PVE) is the inadequate and short-term funding cycles. Social finance is an emerging sector with the potential to close the investment gap through social impact bonds (SIBs), or pay-for-success models, offered to private investors by government. Investments would fund PVE work, and investors would receive payouts according to pre-determined success metrics. These may include: reductions in the costs of violence and destruction of public property, reduced public healthcare expenditure, decreases in lost tourism revenues or foreign direct investment (FDI), and so on.

The final Chapter 13 argues that peace is not simply the absence of conflict superficially maintained by the threat of coercion, and concludes that violent extremism is preventable. Violence cost the world US$14.76 trillion in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms in 2017, and leads to negative economic impacts including a major decline in FDI and depreciation of domestic currency. Groups like Daesh and Al Qaeda believe that over-extending governments through increased military spending and presence, will lead to their downfall. Particularly when increased military budget allocations divert public expenditure from socially and economically uplifting programs; thereby feeding grievances, polarization, and a domestic environment susceptible to radicalization.

While proving prevention of radicalization may be challenging, we can measure alternative proxy indicators such as:

• Whether peacebuilding interventions decreased support for militant groups and activities by non-state actors to undermine counterterrorism efforts.

- The effectiveness of interventions in alleviating societal grievances, perceptions of socio-economic inequality and injustice that increase vulnerability to terrorist recruitment.

- Measuring levels of collaboration, trust, and communication between communities and security forces.

- Other markers of good governance that create and sustain peaceful societies that are resilient to violence.

Every dollar invested in countries where there is conflict reduces the future cost of conflict by US$16. Yet peacebuilding is grossly underfunded. In 2015, foundations made a total of 2,908 grants totaling just US$350.7 million for peace. Effective terrorism prevention necessitates a greater proportionality in investments for positive peace. Olaimy suggests allocating just 1 percent of all global defense spending, which was US$1.7 trillion in 2018, to provide peacebuilding activities with a more meaningful budget. If these are not investments we are willing to make, we must ask ourselves whether we really want peace.

## KEY CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusions and insights from this book can be summarized as follows:

1. Anyone can turn to violent extremism given the right circumstances or provoked with sufficient moral outrage, as social psychology studies have proven. Therefore, humanizing counterterrorism forces us to confront these underlying conditions—the disease, rather than the symptoms.

2. Islam is largely used as a moral justification for sociopolitical and economic grievances, or for purposes of atonement in the case of martyrs carrying shame for engaging in un-Islamic behaviors.

3. A small minority of foreign fighters joined Daesh to establish a caliphate. The majority joined for what the caliphate promised to offer: justice, equality, and belonging.

4. Given the disillusionment of foreign fighters with the on-the-ground realities of joining Daesh, we are well-positioned to outperform the so-called Islamic state by providing the social, economic, and political inclusion they allege to offer to lure their recruits.

5. Historically, military interventions have led to the demise of only 7 percent of terrorist organizations since 1968—with the least amount of success in defeating such groups. Not only are military interventions alone ineffective; they can be counterproductive and can exacerbate the conditions that breed violent extremism.

6. A sounder religious pedagogy can effectively deradicalize Islamist militant leaders and has proven successful with Boko Haram. However, such programs must avoid counternarrative rhetoric, which can backfire. Instead they should focus on narrative reconstruction, and a contextual holistic understanding of Islam and Islamic values.

7. The impact of cultivating empathy and compassion has been successful in reducing prison recidivism rates of young extremists; and has even shown structural changes to the brain and an increase in pro-social behaviors, according to neuroscientific studies.

8. Inclusive urban policies can successfully prevent terrorist recruitment in high-risk areas such as Mechelen, which is located between the former ISIS hotbeds of Brussels and Antwerp.

9. Military and security forces should conduct systems mapping to study and forecast unintended consequences of their interventions. Moreover, unconventional collaborations between security forces and peacebuilding organizations can lead to positive outcomes such as: trust building, increased communication and intelligence to thwart terrorist attacks, and decreased violence and disruptions.

10. Prevention and peacebuilding budgets are grossly inadequate. Re-allocating just 1 percent of military budgets towards prevention could yield a 1:16 return on investment and achieve greater human security. The private sector can also play an integral role by investing in peacebuilding.
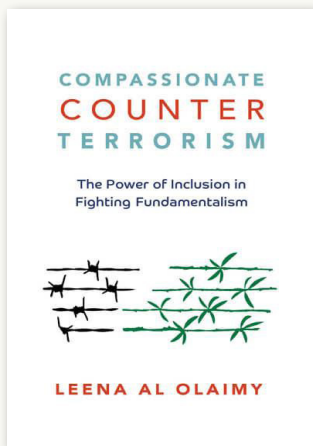
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