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# Islamophobia and the Spoils of Violent Fatwas

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**Abstract**

The current research aimed to examine the key manifestations of violent fatwas, particularly those that incite bloodshed, within the context of Arab-Islamic culture. These fatwas are categorized into two types. The first type comprises institutional fatwas, issued by official religious institutions or individuals who represent states in their capacity as political leaders or as figures combining political and religious authority. These two types of fatwas take two directions: they target individuals abroad or at home, including their own countries and leaders, or foreign countries. The research highlighted how fatwas advocating bloodshed in both categories are often co-opted by those who fear Islam to fuel Islamophobia, portraying all Muslims as violent and terrorists without acknowledging that Muslims are not a monolithic group. Among Muslims are those who condemn such fatwas, as well as those who fall victim to them. The study demonstrated that these generalizations obscure the diversity within Islamic culture and serve as tools for anti-Muslim propaganda. Furthermore, the study aimed to establish that fatwas contributing to the stigmatization of Islam and Muslims as violent both serve as spoils and create a predicament. They provoke angry and accusatory reactions towards Muslims, causing their concerns to be consistently framed by rulings that diminish their significance. Fatwas sanctioning the taking of life are presented as evidence of hatred and violence, fuelling mobilization against these matters—even when they are merely issues.

***Keywords*** **:** discourse, fatwas, Islamophobia, perception of Islam, violence

## Introduction

*Fatwas*, both historically and today, are a prime example of significant religious expression. Since some fatwas address extremely specific situations, acts by particular people, or reactions to scientific or technological advancements, this form of discourse is typically distinguished by its specific and contextual nature. Fatwas are closely tied to the historical circumstances surrounding their issuance, making them a form of historical discourse, governed by specific temporal and contextual realities.[1]

What confirms the historical nature of fatwa discourse is the fact that different scholars may issue varying fatwas on the same issue (for instance, organ donation). Additionally, the same scholar may change his stance over time, issuing a new ruling that contradicts his previous fatwa. This highlights the notion that the discourse of fatwas is intrinsically linked to the circumstances of its production, including the emotional, psychological, and ideological factors at play during its issuance.[2]

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[1]Abdullah ibn Muhammad ibn Said Al-Khunein, *Al-Fatwa fi al-Shariah al -Islamiyyah [Fatwas in Islamic Law]*, 1st ed. (Riyadh: Al-Obeikan Library, 2017).

[2]Abu Abd Al-Malik Ahmad ibn Abd Allah Al-Sulami, *Fī Manzilat al-Fatwā wa Azam al -Iqdām alayhā, wa Anna al-Salaf Kānū Yatawqūnahā [A Treatise on the Status of Fatwas and the Greatness of Undertaking Them, and How the Salaf Avoided Them]*, 1st ed. (Riyadh: Al-Maarif Library, 2011).

Following Michel Foucaults (n.d.) argument that every discourse inherently contains power dynamics and grants authority to its producer, especially when it assumes a religious guise, it can be asserted that every discourse carries microphysical power, suggesting that power is hidden, unmanifest, and takes various forms. Similarly, fatwa discourse involves significant struggles for authority, functioning as a form of provisional legislation tied to specific issues. One of the dangers of fatwa discourse is that, despite its ties to historical contexts and its potential to distort religious discourse—causing people to view it with suspicion—it is often justified by the argument that human error is inevitable. Additionally, it is claimed that the same individual may revise their fatwa as circumstances change. However, what these individuals fail to realize is that these errors are committed in the name of the sacred, and the resulting tragedies have irreversible consequences on peoples lives. Simp ly admitting that the fatwa was incorrect does not undo the damage.

The issue becomes even more harmful when the fatwa involves the shedding of blood. The targeting of a specific individual's life may lead towards loss of lives, representing a level of violence that can neither be justified nor undone once the fatwa has been issued. Furthermore, these fatwas often carry political and ideological conflicts that distort the image of Islam and Muslims, leading to their mistreatment. This suggests that such discourse may harm the religion and act as an obstacle to renewing religious discourse and promoting coexistence. It is also one of the faces of the spread of Islamophobia.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study adopted a cultural studies approach to analyze the various reactions to fatwas related to violence and how they are employed by those seeking to promote Islamophobic discourse. This approach is chosen for its suitability to the topic, as it allows for an exploration of the intersections between politics, religion, society, and culture, as well as the dynamics of power and knowledge. Consequently, the research focused not on the fatwas themselves, however, on the reactions they provoke and how these reactions are leveraged in broader civilizational and cultural conflicts.

The significance of this research lies in its attempt to examine the reactions provoked by certain fatwas related to violence and how they are exploited to stigmatize Islam and fuel Islamophobia. Rather than cataloging or analyzing the fatwas themselves, this study explored how they are transformed into political tools—used, for instance, to secure electoral gains or justify restrictive laws against Muslim immigrants in the West.

The issue of violent fatwas has been discussed in various works, one of the most notable being Jamal al-Banna's book *No, then No*, which critiques such fatwas as incompatible with Islamic teachings. However, it does not address their impact on Islamophobia or their exploitation by its promoters. Another relevant study is a Master's thesis from the University of Venice by Wali Abd al-Wahed, titled *Islamophobia: The Formation of Image*. This study examined the Salman Rushdie case and how Western perceptions of Muslims are shaped, however, it does not focus on how such fatwas are weaponized to incite further hatred.

The central hypothesis of this research is that the proliferation and chaos of violent fatwas within Islamic discourse become material for exploitation, aiding the spread of Islamophobia and reinforcing narratives that associate Islamic culture with terrorism and violence.

### 2.1. Research Questions

Considering the diversity and disorder surrounding above-mentioned fatwas, this study raised the following key questions:

- How do fatwas related to violence become a tool for proponents of Islamophobia?
- How does the chaos of fatwas in the Islamic world—especially their issuance beyond official institutions—pose a threat to those with differing intellectual or political views?

- What are the possible solutions for regulating violent fatwas and mitigating their dangers?

### 3. Bloodshed Fatwas and the Image of Violent Islam

Discussing fatwas that call for the shedding of blood does not deny the fact that other societies have their own forms of spreading hatred and rejecting tolerance. However, the study focused on Islamic religious discourse—how it is perceived and renewed so that it evolves without becoming an obstacle for Muslims to integrate into global civilization, thereby sparing them the stigma of inferiority and the preconceived accusation of violence and terrorism.

Fatwas that sanction bloodshed have greatly harmed the image of Arab-Islamic culture, providing ample ammunition for Islamophobes to attack and distort the image of Islam, presenting Muslims as violent individuals who cannot tolerate diversity. These fatwas contribute to the perception that Islamic culture resolves differences only through bloodshed and is intolerant of dissent and criticism. Consequently, this violent characterization provides Islamophobes with evidence to support their viewpoints.

Despite the differences in the fatwas—depending on who issues them or who is targeted—the result is the same: reinforcing the image of Muslims as violent, coming from a culture whose religion is marked by violence. This point serves as a tool to spread fear of Islam and Muslims, with far-reaching consequences. [3] For instance, many Western writers, such as Oriana Fallaci, Alexandre del Valle, and even Bernard Lewis have exploited these fatwas. They argue that the issue lies within the Islamic culture and its religion, claiming that Islam is inherently violent, rejects dialogue, and resorts to violence in any conflict, whether internal or external.[4] This opinion has been refuted by many Muslim thinkers with a progressive inclination, such as Muhammad Arkoun.[5]

Moreover, the discourse surrounding these fatwas cannot serve as a foundation for any dialogue between religions or cultures. It fosters hatred, as such fatwas not only amplify animosity among those within the Islamic culture, however, also among non-Muslims who come across them. They only bring joy to extremists on both sides: Muslim extremists who find in them an easy tool for declaring others as infidels and eliminating opponents, whether they share the same cultural background or are external adversaries, and to Islamophobes who exploit them to further spread fear and hatred. Resultantly, all efforts by Muslim scholars or intellectuals to present a positive image of Islamic culture seem to fall flat in the face of the destructive image these fatwas create in peoples minds, portraying Islam as bloodthirsty.

If bloodshed fatwas are categorized and analysed, it would be determined that they vary depending on who issues them. Some are issued by religious institutions affiliated with certain Islamic countries and may be considered official, while others are issued by clerics belonging to Islamist movements or religiously extremist groups. These fatwas also divide into those issued by state representatives against individuals or opposing groups, and others issued by members of extremist religious groups against certain states, their leaders, intellectuals, or artists. Furthermore,

[3]Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage: Why So Many Muslims Deeply Resent the West, and Why Their Bitterness Will Not Easily Be Mollified," *The Atlantic Monthly*, (September 1990), https://balkansbg.eu/en/content/library/587-the-roots-of-muslim-rage.html

[4]Oriana Fallaci, *The Rage and the Pride* (New York: Rizzoli, 2001); Alexander Del Valle, *Le Totalitarisme Islamiste à lassaut des démocraties [Islamist Totalitarianisms Assault on Democracies]* (Paris: Syrtes, 2002); Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage: Why So Many Muslims Deeply Resent the West, and Why Their Bitterness Will Not Easily Be Mollified."

[5]Mohammed Arkoun, *De Manhattan à Bagdad: Au-delà du Bien et du Mal* (*From Manhattan to Baghdad: Beyond Good and Evil*). (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2013).

these fatwas can target individuals or states outside the Islamic sphere or individuals and states within it.

Therefore, fatwas endorsing bloodshed should be viewed within the context of efforts to reform religious discourse. This ensures that religion is not used as a tool to spread hatred, whether by extremists within Islamic culture or by those suffering from Islamophobia, who might exploit such fatwas to brand Muslims as violent. This calls for a different interpretive approach that denies both extremists, who use fatwas to eliminate their opponents, and those who capitalize on these moments to reinforce their hateful views, aiming to portray Islam and Muslims as proponents of a violent ideology that justifies killing, bloodshed, and rejects diversity.

## 4. Bloodshed Fatwas Against the Other: A Spoil for Advocates of Violence and Conflict

Bloodshed fatwas cannot be viewed in isolation from the historical and cultural context, marking the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the third, a period heavily focused on the clash or dialogue between civilizations. In this context, it is important to ask questions about the benefits that advocates of these clashes gain from such fatwas.

Many supporters of the clash narrative raise the idea that Islam is inherently violent. For instance, Samuel Huntington (1996), in his book *The Clash of Civilizations*, highlights the "bloody borders," of Islam, emphasizing the perceived readiness of Muslims to shed blood over religious differences. He argues that this violent culture cannot engage in dialogue, however, must instead be confronted in conflict.[6] Another remarkable figure in this discourse is the orientalist Bernard Lewis, whose essay *The Roots of Muslim Rage*, written after the events of September 11th, underscores the violent nature of Muslims. Lewis argues that they harbour an essential hatred towards the West, driving them to engage in terrorism, violence, and the killing of dissenters.

Such portrayals of Islam as inherently violent serve the interests of those seeking to perpetuate conflict between Islam and other cultures, reinforcing harmful stereotypes of Muslims as bloodthirsty and opposed to peaceful coexistence. This perspective exploits extremism to stigmatize an entire culture, accusing it of violence and inciting hatred and counter-violence. As Ramonet (2002) points out, the borders of many nations, including those of Western civilization, are often marked by bloodshed.[7]

### 4.1. The Perils of State-issued Fatwas: Islamophobia and Institutional Violence

What amplifies the danger of these fatwas is that they lend credibility to the arguments of Islamophobes and advocates of conflict when addressing their audiences. The most impactful of these fatwas are those issued by states against individuals or institutions from other societies. A prominent example is Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa calling for the death of Salman Rushdie, which left Rushdie under Western protection and made his case a symbol of the alleged violence of Islam and Muslims.[8] This fatwa has often been cited by Western proponents of Islamophobia to bolster their claims about the violent nature of Islam.

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[6]Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

[7]For further study on this see Ignacio Ramonet, *Géopolitique du chaos [Geopolitics of Chaos]*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

[8]For more details see Emma Guinness, "What is a Fatwa and Why Did Iran Issue One Against Salman Rushdie for *The Satanic Verses* in 1989? It Was Only After the Fatwa Was Lifted by Iran in 1998 That He Was Willing to Be Seen in Public Again," *The Independent*, April 15, 2024, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/salman-rushdie-fatwa-santanic-verses-knife-b2528749.html.

The tragedy of this fatwa lies in its issuance by an official representative of an Islamic government. It is striking that, at the close of the 20th century, in a global context marked by the retreat of religions authority over the state, a fatwa was issued by the highest authority in an Islamic state calling for the death of a writer—without trial or defense—merely for a creative work. While the prosecution of creativity is inherently unacceptable, it becomes even more troubling when an official body in an Islamic state transform into a tool for issuing fatwas that call for the killing of creators. This represents a significant stain on a culture where authority remains medieval, dominated by the power of religious figures who prosecute and shed the blood of those who innovate and create.

The matter became even more alarming when an extremist attempted to carry out the fatwa more than 30 years after its issuance. This act reignited Western public opinion against Muslims and Islam, portraying them as institutionally-violent within their faith. Such fatwas gain their dangerous significance from being perceived as official endorsements of violence, especially by critics of Islamic culture who promote Islamophobia. These critics cite such fatwas as official evidence of the inherent violence in Islamic culture, given that they are issued by state-sanctioned institutions. This undermines the argument that Muslims have long defended and which states that violence is not the characteristic of Islam or its followers, placing responsibility solely on extremists. In the eyes of critics, the issuance of fatwas that call for the bloodshed of dissenters by official institutions in Islamic countries proves that Islamic violence is not restricted to individuals but is systemic. Consequently, these types of fatwas often develop increased hatred and racism towards Muslims in societies where Muslim immigrants reside, as they reinforce negative stereotypes about Islam being inherently violent. This perspective holds merit, yet it fails to recognize that the violence inflicted in the name of religion within these countries is a direct consequence of their religious foundations. These regimes do not solely target Westerners; in fact, the suffering of their own citizens can be even more profound. This illustrates that the tragedy primarily affects those within the culture itself.

While the struggle against religious states is a universal imperative, it is crucial to acknowledge that the West frequently supports these religious regimes in the region, permitting them to govern their populations under the guise of religion, driven by interests that align with its own agenda.

#### 4.1.1. Bloodshed Fatwas: A Double-edged Sword in the Narrative of Islamophobia

Since the narrative surrounding bloodshed fatwas is the central argument of the study, it should be thoroughly demonstrated and supported. This narrative plays directly into the hands of those in the West who promote the idea that Muslims inherently oppose the West, attributing this hostility not to Western intervention, but to a deep-rooted ideological conflict. This viewpoint suggests that Muslims, by nature, reject Western values, such as freedom, democracy, and human rights, resorting to violence whenever they express this rejection. For proponents of this idea, bloodshed fatwas serve as compelling evidence to support their claims.

Each fatwa that calls for bloodshed becomes a powerful tool for those promoting this narrative, allowing them to depict Muslims and Islamic culture as fundamentally opposed to the West, its civilization and values. Figures, such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, who advocate for the idea of an inevitable clash between Islam and the West, seize this opportunity to portray Islam not merely as a different culture or religion but as an active enemy that should be feared and resisted.

According to this perception, bloodshed fatwas become the key evidence, fuelling the argument that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with Western values and that Muslims, driven by these teachings, cannot peacefully integrate into Western societies. Unfortunately, this narrative finds its way into political discourse, influencing public opinion and shaping policies aimed at limiting the

presence and influence of Muslims in Western countries.[9] This perspective fails to acknowledge that fatwas calling for the shedding of blood are issued by the entities most hostile to modernity in Islamic countries. These groups thrive on ignorance and the oppression faced by Muslim populations; they portray the Western other as the cause of their backwardness, claiming that the West supports dictatorial regimes. In doing so, they present their actions as a means of reclaiming the dignity that has been undermined.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that such fatwas, particularly when issued by official institutions, serve as evidence of a refusal to engage in dialogue with Islamic culture. They provide ammunition for Western right-wing movements to promote the idea of a clash of civilizations and to reject any dialogue or coexistence with a culture that resolves its issues not through dialogue but through bloodshed fatwas against dissenters. In this way, Islamophobic advocates benefit greatly from the issuance of these fatwas and use them to prove the validity of their positions to present the Islamic culture as violent in nature. Thus, fatwas issued by entities linked to countries in the Islamic world play a major role in increasing hatred towards Islam and Muslims.

Fatwas issued by parties within Islamic countries play a significant role in fuelling hatred towards Islam and its followers. When these fatwas originate from regimes that claim to uphold Islamic principles yet exhibit hostility towards freedom, they become potent tools for advocates of conflict and promoters of hatred, offering ready-made arguments to justify their agendas. One of the most significant perspectives to highlight is that of Tzvetan Todorov (2008), a defender of Islamic culture who nonetheless critiques Muslims.[10] Todorov finds it paradoxical that Westerners, despite claiming to champion diversity and pluralism, often provoke Islamic culture by deliberately insulting its sanctities. At the same time, he critiques Muslims for responding to accusations of terrorism and violence by legislating and practicing further violence. Todorov argues that this defensive approach, which includes shedding the blood of certain Western writers and artists, ultimately elevates the status of these individuals, amplifies their works, and reinforces the portrayal of Muslims as violent—precisely the narrative their provocateurs seek to establish.

#### 4.1.2 State-sanctioned Violence: The Dangers of Bloodshed Fatwas in Islamic Governance

The bloodshed fatwas issued by institutions under the authority of Islamic states are fewer compared to those issued by individuals or religious and political groups. However, their impact is far more dangerous, as they reinforce the narrative that violence among Muslims is neither individual nor limited to extremist groups. Such fatwas often serve as a pretext for incitement against Islamic states and efforts to deprive them of opportunities for development.

This is evident, for instance, in the writings of Samuel Huntington, who argues that Islamic states must be prevented from achieving progress that would enable them to acquire technological means for exercising violence. This would ultimately backfire against the West, as Muslims, in his view, inherently harbour hostility towards it.[11] Thus, Islamophobes use these fatwas not only to advocate for the exclusion of Muslims from the West but also to justify denying them access to knowledge, science, and modern technology, fearing that such access could pose a significant threat to humanity.

[9]Bernard Lewis, *Le Langage politique de lIslam [The Political Language of Islam]* , trans. Odette Guitard (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

[10]Tzvetan Todorov, *La Peur des barbares ou – de la des Civilisations [The Fear of Barbarians or the Decline of Civilizations]* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2008).

[11]For further study on this see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

Thus, fatwas calling for the shedding of blood, issued by institutions linked to state authorities, promote a simplistic view that depicts these nations as inherently antagonistic towards the West and its culture, suggesting they are prepared to shed the blood of any dissenting individual. This perspective is overly generalized, presenting Muslims as a homogeneous group with an intrinsic inclination towards violence. It implies that these societies have willingly chosen their rulers and the institutions that generate such fatwas. Those who espouse this view conveniently overlook the fact that these institutions impose repression on their own communities in ways that may far exceed the effects of fatwas directed outward.

4.2. Fatwas by Clerics and Extremist Groups and the Accusation of Widespread Violence

Fatwas sanctioning the killing of foreigners are not limited to state institutions. Some clerics also issue such fatwas based on their religious leadership or their positions within extremist Islamic movements.

Some individuals who are convinced by these fatwas attempt to carry them out, as seen in the assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh due to his film, which was deemed offensive to Islam.[12] This prompted a young Moroccan who was influenced by calls to shed Van Goghs blood, to murder him. As for the films screenwriter, Dutch Somali Hirsi Ali, continues to live under police protection due to ongoing threats against her life.

The Dutch far-right has long used these incidents to sow discord against Islam and Muslims and to protest their presence in the country. One prominent example is that of far-right leader Geert Wilders, who has regularly attacked Islam and Muslims, accusing them of violence and using such incidents as proof. However, cleric Faiz Mohammed's response to his rhetoric—an additional fatwa that called for his execution—made Wilders live in continual fear. This strengthened his criticism of Islam and Muslims since he used his own predicament to support his claims that Islamic culture is inherently violent. As a result of these incidents, Wilders became an outspoken supporter of Islamophobia, using them as justification to amplify his criticisms and persuade his listeners that they must be against Islam and Muslims.

The murder of Theo van Gogh was a significant factor in Geert Wilders' rise to prominence, according to many journalists and political analysts. Additionally, he took advantage of the fatwa that demanded his execution, portraying himself as a victim in order to win over his fellow citizens. The notion that the presence of Muslim immigrants threatens Dutch societal values was strengthened when Wilders was able to convince some sections of the public that he was being persecuted in his own nation. Herein, Geert Wilders used the incident to paint all Muslims in the Netherlands as terrorists, calling for their expulsion. This response represents a form of racial violence, using the actions of extremists to fuel support for equally extreme and racist policies. As Dominique Lormier (2007) points out, extremism thrives on its opposing counterpart.[13]

This case, as outlined in the previous paragraph, demands a thorough analysis to fully understand its dimensions and implications. We are facing a cycle of fatwas and their exploitation. Those who called for the killing of Van Goghs descendant, legitimizing violence and cloaking it in religious sanctity, are laying the foundation for a so-called holy war against dissenting views—

[12]For more details on this see Ron Eyerman, *The Assassination of Theo van Gogh: From Social Drama to Cultural Trauma* (Politics, History, and Culture) (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008).

[13]Dominique Lormier, *La dérive intégriste : chrétiens, juifs et musulmans face au fondamentalisme [The Fundamentalist Drift: Christians, Jews, and Muslims Confronting Fundamentalism]* (Paris: Acropole, 2007).

something that cannot be justified under any circumstances. By doing so, they provided the religious backing that the perpetrator of the crime relied on.

### 4.2.1. Fatwas and Fear: Shaping Anti-Islam Sentiment in the West

Numerous fatwas and actions have been carried out by individuals based on fatwas sanctioning the killing of artists, journalists, or Western politicians. Such fatwas or actions have become a weapon for promoters of Islamophobia. Many of these individuals discuss the difficulty of coexisting with Muslims, particularly those who were born in European countries and hold their citizenship.[14] The situation has escalated to the point where there are calls to be wary of them, portraying them as disloyal to the countries of their birth and loyal instead to a doctrine that opposes the values of their societies. This view presents them as a threat to the concept of citizenship as understood by Western societies. It is a right-wing perspective that seeks to exploit the violence incited by those who issue fatwas calling for bloodshed, to rally Western societies against Muslim immigrants in Western countries.

In this context, advocates of hatred and fear towards Islam and Muslims use the indiscriminate fatwas issued by clerics and members of extremist Islamic groups against Western figures—such as artists, writers, politicians, and journalists—as a powerful tool to spread fear about Islam and Muslims. For instance, Bernard Lewis (2003), in his book *The Crisis of Islam*, argues that Islamic culture inherently rejects diversity and therefore, directs its violence against those who are different, blaming them for its own failures. He cited numerous fatwas sanctioning violence against Westerners who criticize Islam, asserting that these fatwas reflect the true nature of Islam and its purportedly violent tendencies.[15] He dismissed the notion that Muslims are not inherently violent, claiming that such an argument reduces the issue to a few extremists who do not represent Islam, which he regarded as a fallacy. In his view, Islamic rhetoric demonstrates that Muslims adhere to a violent doctrine that resolves its differences by shedding the blood of others.

From this, it can be understood that such fatwas, reflecting a form of extremism, are often appropriated by radical groups in the West that promote Islamophobia to support their narratives. These groups depict Westerners as being under threat in their own homelands from a culture that seeks to deprive them of their rights and freedom. This viewpoint is further clarified by the research of French philosopher Marc Crépon (2002). He contends that the West constantly looks for an outside foe to bring its societies together and ignore internal conflicts in favour of facing an outside threat.[16] By inciting fear to paint Muslims as a danger to Western societies and their ideals, fatwas that condone violence against Westerners—and the crimes that occasionally follow—help to support the claim that Islam is a lurking enemy.

Whether issued by state-affiliated official institutions, individual Muslims, or extremist religious groups, fatwas advocating the shedding of non-Muslim blood can be considered a basis for demonizing Islam and Muslims. These fatwas support anti-diversity, anti-terrorism, and violent stereotypes. Furthermore, these fatwas are a great tool for conflict advocates and proponents of Islamophobia, providing rationale for their stances and stoking anti-Muslim sentiment. Furthermore, such troubling fatwas are also issued against Muslims within Islamic countries, which often force these individuals to seek refuge in Western nations, further fuelling anti-Islamic sentiments. Additionally, the communications revolution has made it easier for the global audience to access

[14]Francis Fukuyama, "Rewriting History and Focusing on the Danger of Muslims in Europe," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 35 (December 2005).

[15]Bernard Lewis, *L'Islam en crise [Islam in Crisis]* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

[16]Marc Crépon, *LImposture du choc des civilisations [The Deception of the Clash of Civilizations]* (Nantes: Éditions Pleins Feux, 2002).

information about such fatwas. Islamophobes in the West exploit these instances to reinforce their claims that the culture of Islam is inherently violent and intolerant, even within its own communities.

## 5. Fatwas of Violence against Muslims and the Image of a Troubled, Violent Culture

The second type of fatwas, whether issued by states or by individuals and extremist religious groups, advocates violence against Muslims. This type of fatwas contributes to the perception that violence is an inherent characteristic of Islam and Muslims. Such argument is frequently utilized by those who distort Islam and promote Islamophobia, whether they are outsiders, former Muslims, or individuals, such as Hirsi Ali, who identifies as a former Muslim. These fatwas reinforce the notion that there exists a radical culture intolerant of any dissent, whether from within its own cultural circle or from outside it.

### 5.1. The States Issuance of Death Fatwas and the C risis of Citizenship

When discussing the examples of state-sanctioned fatwas or those issued by affiliated institutions advocating violence, two notable cases stand out, each having significant repercussions and serving as arguments leveraged by those distorting Islam and spreading Islamophobia.

The first case is the execution of the Sudanese thinker and politician Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, who was tried for apostasy, had his blood declared permissible, and was executed for refusing to recant his views.[17] The use of apostasy as a pretext to eliminate political opponents illustrates how state authorities exploit such fatwas to stifle dissent. This practice contributes to the perception that Islamic culture is inherently violent, with official institutions using legal charges, such as apostasy, to eliminate their political adversaries.[18]

The global campaign advocating for Taha and protesting the injustice he faced has provided ample material for critics of Islamic culture and promoters of Islamophobia to exploit. It is illogical that, in a purely political conflict, the state and its institutions should assume the role of both adversary and judge in a religious matter, issuing rulings based on fatwas calling for bloodshed to eliminate political opponents. In this sense, fatwas become a tool for exclusion and silencing of any dissent. The state thus, transforms into a religious authority, using religion as a weapon in political conflicts that should remain civil, effectively closing the public sphere to opposition by leveraging fatwas.

The second incident was the fatwa issued by Al-Azhars Committee of Scholars calling for the shedding blood of Farag Fawda.[19] This fatwa issued by religious figures, representing state-affiliated institutions, ultimately led to his assassination by a radical group. The involvement of religious leaders did not end there; Sheikh Al-Ghazali went so far as to testify in court, claiming that those who killed Fawda were not murderers but were guilty merely of "usurping the authority" of the state or the rightful ruler. This stance created the impression that prominent Islamic religious institutions and their representatives justify the elimination of dissenters and the shedding of their blood.

These kinds of incidents give those who want to malign Islam and Muslims a great chance to portray Islam as fundamentally violent and repressive. Similar incidents, like that of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who was compelled to seek safety in the Netherlands and received assistance from Western

[17]For a detailed study about the case see Edward Thomas, *Islams Perfect Stranger: The Life of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, Muslim Reformer of Sudan* (International Library of African Studies) (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

[18]Jamal El-Banna, *Kallā Thumma Kallā [No, Still No!]* (Cairo: Dar Al-Fikr Al-Islami, 1994).

[19]For further study on this case see Ana Belén Soage, "Faraj Fawda, or the Cost of Freedom of Expression," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (June 2007): 26-33, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria_200706/meria_200706_3_soage.pdf

organizations, have served to further support this narrative.[20] These incidents demonstrate how urgently the discourse surrounding fatwas needs to be critically examined and changed in order to disassociate Muslims from the stereotype that they practice a violent religion and to stop giving Islamophobes more ammunition.

By addressing these issues, the broader Muslim community may counteract harmful narratives and ensure that Islamic teachings are understood as promoting peace and tolerance, rather than being exploited as justifications for violence.

### 5.1.1. Al-Azhars Complicity in Political Suppression

Building on the above portrayal of Al-Azhar, a state-affiliated organization in Egypt and one of the most revered religious establishments in the Islamic world, this institution has been linked to issuing fatwas that result in the execution of citizens for their opposition to a theocratic government and dissent. This demonstrates a medieval mentality that despises diversity and is prepared to use physical force to subdue intellectual rivals. The judiciarys seeming deference to religious leaders and fatwas is even more concerning. Al-Ghazalis testimony in court was more than just a witness account; it was another fatwa to spare the murderers from a penalty commensurate with their offense. By changing the charge from murder to insubordination against the state, he tried to reinterpret their behaviour. According to Al-Ghazali, the state has the right to execute apostates, and since these people carried out the states mandate, they had overre ached their authority rather than committed a heinous murder. Hence, a risky blurring of the boundaries between legal justice and religious decrees is highlighted by this interaction between the judiciary and religious authority. It emphasizes the urgent need for reform in the relationship between state institutions and religious organizations to prevent ideological biases that excuse violence against dissenters from undermining justice.

Such incidents of government or state-affiliated religious leaders issuing fatwas authorizing bloodshed are so frequent that they significantly distort Islamic culture. Instead of protecting civil rights, freedom of speech, and freedom of political activity, the state is transformed into an organization that interprets religious scriptures to suppress political opponents and dissidents, accusing them of being apostates and authorizing their murder. Furthermore, these acts are cited as evidence that Islamic states apply various types of tyranny against political dissenters in the name of religion, demonstrating their inherent religious oppression.

Some theorists of Islamophobia, such as Oriana Fallaci or Alexandre del Valle have even argued that despotism is an inherent trait of Islam, viewing democratic exceptions within Islamic contexts as anomalies. They assert that the nature of Islamic culture and the religion it is based on is fundamentally authoritarian and incapable of accepting democracy or citizenship.[21]

### 5.1.2. Analysing Fatwas: Philosophical Implications and Global Ramifications

Fatwas calling for the shedding of blood may be viewed from a philosophical perspective as an attempt to impose dominance over the public sphere.[22] The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1990) argued that modern states seek to control the public sphere through the exercise of legitimate violence. However, if we consider the state in Arab countries from this angle, it can be said that Islamic states, due to their lack of legitimacy compared to other states, often resort to fatwas for shedding blood to silence dissenters and opponents. They use accusations that position themselves as defenders of the religion, thereby granting their actions a semblance of religious legitimacy. Some

[20]For further study on this see Nadia Oweidat, *Reform and Its Perils in Contemporary Islam: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[21]Bernard Lewis, *LIslam en crise [Islam in Crisis]* .

[22]Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

fatwas issued by entities close to the state in the Islamic world indeed aim to dominate the public sphere by employing violence legitimized by religion, under the pretext of protecting sacred values from transgression. The underlying objective, however, is to intimidate any opposing or dissenting parties from entering the public sphere or openly expressing dissent, turning fatwas for shedding blood into a political crime and a tool of repression against those who differ.

The execution of citizens by the state in the name of religion through fatwas for shedding blood reflects poorly on any country and tarnishes its image. Such fatwas paint a negative picture of life under Islam, or more broadly, within Islamic states. This depiction is utilized by critics to argue that Islamic culture is inherently troubled and violent, with institutionalized aggression where the state uses religion to suppress dissent. Consequently, this narrative is akin to the historical practices of the Western inquisition, which deeply offends Western sensibilities due to its association with extreme violence and oppression. The global reach of modern communication technology means that such occurrences in Islamic countries are widely reported. These occurrences amplify fears about a culture where the state or its affiliated religious institutions act as inquisitorial bodies, persecuting dissenters in the name of religion.

### 5.2. Fatwas of Bloodshed and the Crisis of Violence and Legitimacy

Fatwas calling for bloodshed have not been used solely by Islamic states. Extremist religious groups and their leaders have also employed them, directing them against the state itself, those in power, and individuals, such as politicians, intellectuals, and writers. For instance, Anwar Sadat was assassinated under a fatwa, and several extremist groups have declared the state an enemy, considering it *Dar al-Harb* (house of war). Moreover, a list of writers and thinkers who have been assassinated includes figures, such as Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), Husayn Muroeh, and numerous artists and intellectuals who have lived under security protection due to these fatwas.[23] This creates a negative impression of Muslims and Islam.

The rhetoric of bloodshed fatwas exacerbates the plight of Muslims, particularly migrants, while further tarnishing the image of Islam, associating it with violence, and perpetuating the notion that Muslims use religion as a tool in both external conflicts and internal disputes. One notable instance is from Sadats time, when he introduced a law to the State Council in the early 1970s requiring the judiciary to target his leftist and nationalist opponents with the punishment of apostasy, which included bloodshed. Ironically, the extremist religious organizations he had previously allowed to aid him in his battle against his enemies later issued a fatwa calling for his murder. This illustrates how apostasy fatwas are used as a weapon to control the public sphere, supporting Jürgen Habermass claim that the goal of power is to monopolize the public sphere by keeping opponents out.[24] However, these fatwas in the Islamic context seek to eradicate people completely, not just to keep them out of public conversation.

An especially bleak picture of Islamic culture is painted by the unchecked spread of bloodshed fatwas. In Islamic countries, these fatwas have been used as a weapon in wars between various factions. When political entities label their opponents as infidels and condone the violence against them, they also get accused of the same vice. At some points, countries have labelled certain political

[23]For Mahfouz see Gabriele Cosentino, "What the Stabbing of a Nobel Prize-Winning Novelist Tells Us About Power in Egypt," *New Lines Magazine*, (December 6, 2024), https://newlinesmag.com/essays/what-the-stabbing-of-a-nobel-prize-winning-novelist-tells-us-about-power-in-egypt/ ; for further study on Muroeh see Rula Jurdi Abisaab, "Deconstructing the Modular and the Authentic: Husayn Muroeh's Early Islamic History," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 17, no. 3 (2008): 239–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920802405449.

[24]Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

formations as infidels and sanctioned the killing of their leaders; in retaliation, extremist movements have labelled country's supreme leaders as infidels and issued killing orders against them. This is, however, in consonance with Dieter Senghaas's (2008) assessment that Islamic culture suffers more from the violent tendencies within itself rather than from other cultures.[25]

In the first place, this interplay is dangerous owing to the fact that bloodshed fatwas are deliberately couched to suit particular ends and are used to target enemies. This does not only intensify violence and regional issues but also tarnishes the image of Islamic culture in front of the rest of the world. Such narratives also further Islamophobia at both the local and global scale as they provide an opportunity to critics to portray Islam in a negative light and create fear about Muslims.

## 6. Possible Solutions to Address the Fatwa Turmoil

The issue of bloodshed fatwas may be addressed in a variety of ways by reviving religious discourse. Returning to the Qur'anic text itself, which highlights the value of human life and the denunciation of violence, is one way to address these issues. Another strategy is for Islamic governments and the organizations they are associated with to completely reject these fatwas. Whether issued by official religious institutions or extremist religious factions, this would help stop the spread of bloodshed fatwas in both Muslim-majority countries and Western countries where these groups are active. The nature of these fatwas, their ramifications for Islam and Muslims, and their effects on interpersonal relationships in a world growing more interconnected by the day all demand a thorough scientific discussion among Muslims.

The discourse surrounding bloodshed fatwas must be closely examined and controlled to avoid being used as a weapon in political disputes or as a way to shut out opponents. If left unchallenged, these fatwas would worsen Muslims' internal and external hardships and give those who are hostile to Islam and Muslims a rationale, which feeds into racism and discriminatory practices. Accordingly, the 2016 statement from Egypt's *Dar al-Iftaa* serves as an illustration of efforts to refute fatwas calling for bloodshed. The institution resisted apostasy fatwas directed at the state in a particular political context.[26] This position could serve as a foundation to liberate Islam and Muslims from this crisis, despite the complexities of the situation. *Dar al-Iftaa* asserted that there is no evidence to support the claim that the Prophet Muhammad (*SAW*) executed anyone for apostasy or opposition to his teachings. It also emphasized that such fatwas should only be carried out by a judge and through state authorities. A stance like this opens the door for fresh interpretations, potentially helping the Muslim community overcome the stigma associated with bloodshed fatwas.[27]

Islamic governments need to work together to control the chaos that results from issuing these fatwas which would only increase violence, foster hatred towards Muslims, and heighten fear of them if the field is left open for bloodshed fatwas. Since these fatwas jeopardize civil peace and undercut the values of citizenship and coexistence, criminalizing their issuance is one possible remedy. The preservation of life and the avoidance of strife are strong arguments in favour of criminalization. Furthermore, there may be a compelling case to make this behaviour illegal due to the harm that such fatwas cause to the interests of Muslims around the world. Many Muslims reside in non-Muslim-majority societies, where Islamophobic individuals take advantage of any opportunity to demonize

[25]Dieter T. Senghaas, *Al-Ṣadām Dākhil al-Ḥaḍārah: al-Tafāhum Bishān al-Ṣirāāt al-Thaqāfiyyah [Clash Within Civilization: Understanding Cultural Conflicts]*, trans. Shawki Jalal, 1st ed. (United Arab Emirates: Dar Al-Ain Publishing, 2008).

[26]See Sabri Abdel-Hafeez, "Ulamā wa Dār al-Iftā: Fatāwā Ihdār al-Damm Siyasiyyah," [Scholars and the Fatwa House: Fatwas on the Bloodshed are Political], *Elaph*, May 17, 2015, https://elaph.com/Web/News/2015/5/1010127.html.

[27]Ibid., https://elaph.com/Web/News/2015/5/1010127.html

and misrepresent Muslims. These critics are emboldened by bloodshed fatwas, which provide them with solid evidence to support their disparaging campaigns.

## 7. Conclusion

Fatwas endorsing violence undermine tolerance and harmony within a society. They also represent a threat to human coexistence, as they are a form of violence cloaked in religious authority, which gives them an aura of sanctity. This makes it appear as legitimate violence in the minds of those who wield it. However, such fatwas bring hatred to the religion in whose name they are issued, affecting its followers indiscriminately. These fatwas become tools for spreading hatred, used by extremist movements on both sides to justify their animosity towards the "other" and their rejection of coexistence. In this way, fatwas permitting bloodshed become a gateway to mutual violence that erodes coexistence and tolerance on a global scale.

It can be argued that fatwas concerning bloodshed serve a dual function. On one hand, they represent an attempt to dominate the public sphere from within. On the other hand, from the perspective of Islamophobic advocates, these fatwas provide an opportunity to fuel anti-Muslim sentiment, highlighting the difficulty of integrating Muslim immigrants and accepting differences within Western societies. Consequently, such fatwas, some of which have been implemented within Western nations, become tools for imposing restrictions. They are used to challenge Western values of freedom of expression and respect for human rights. This has led to political and social conflicts in the West, intensifying debates over immigration laws and altering the treatment of Muslims with Western citizenship. In some cases, this rhetoric even justifies the deportation of immigrants on the grounds that they pose a danger to Western societies.

Therefore, it is crucial for Muslims to find ways to extricate themselves from this deadlock by countering the harm caused by such rhetoric. Clerics, intellectuals, and legal scholars must take on the responsibility of educating society to embrace diversity and difference, viewing them as enriching rather than divisive forces that breed violence. This shift in perception may help improve the image of Islam and Muslims, while diminishing the influence of Islamophobic rhetoric.

### 7.1. Future Recommendations

Possible solutions include revising educational curricula in Islamic countries to promote acceptance of differences and constructive criticism. Additionally, there is a need to study Islamic heritage and highlight its open-minded, humanistic aspects. During periods of stability, this culture witnessed remarkable instances of coexistence despite religious and intellectual differences. The occurrences of violence are few compared to the many examples of peaceful coexistence, such as when Americans, upon emigrating from Andalusia, lived in the same neighbourhoods in North Africa, with a mosque situated next to a Jewish synagogue.

## Conflict of Interest

The manuscript author has absolutely no financial or non-financial conflict of interest regarding the subject matter or material discussed in this manuscript.

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The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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