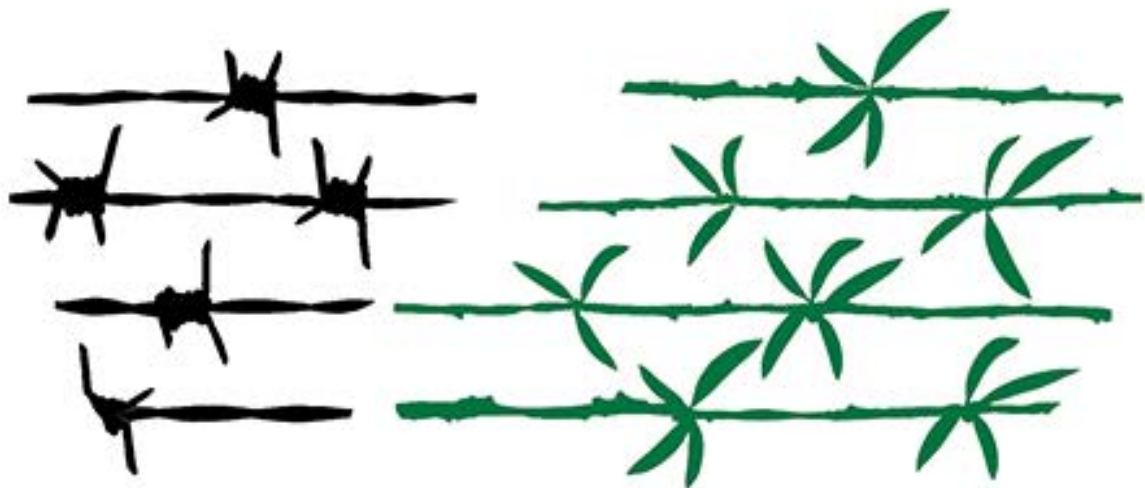# COMPASSIONATE COUNTER TERRORISM

The Power of Inclusion in Fighting Fundamentalism

LEENA AL OLAIMY

Praise for *Compassionate Counterterrorism*

"This book brings a refreshing alternative to the fiction that state force is the long-term solution to terrorism. A thoughtful, personal, and impressive analysis of why a broader approach to the challenge may yield more effective long-term outcomes."

  —**Sir Hugh Orde, OBE, QPM, former Chief Constable, Police Service of Northern Ireland**

"A brilliant and fresh analysis of one of the most misunderstood global problems of our age. If you read one book on terrorism, choose this one."

  —**Lisa Schirch, PhD, editor of *The Ecology of Violent Extremism* and Senior Policy Advisor, Human Security, Alliance for Peacebuilding**

"An honest, comprehensive, and thoughtful critique highlighting and challenging stereotypes and assumptions about terrorism and violent extremism. A must-read for anyone involved in peace building and conflict resolution."

  —**Eva Grosman, CEO, Centre for Democracy and Peace Building, and Director for Public Affairs, Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict, University of Oxford**

"A provocative and concise examination of why we cannot bomb our way to ending terrorism. While the author is careful not to advocate for the absence of a hard security approach, she does a masterful job at highlighting many innovations that have proven effective in reducing and transforming political violence in various parts of the world and challenges the world to do much better and to have higher aspirations."

  —**Craig Zelizer, PhD, founder and CEO, Peace and Collaborative Development Network; former Associate Director, Conflict Resolution Program, Georgetown University; and cofounder of Alliance for Conflict Transformation**

"Intelligent and intrepid work. Leena's effort to unearth a critical societal fault line is the first step toward building a postfundamentalist future for our next generation."

  —**Tariq Cheema, founder of World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists**

"In a refreshing and candid style that goes far beyond conventional analyses and commonly suggested solutions, Al Olaimy delivers a powerful counterargument on how to deal with terrorism. Insightful and persuasive, her book should be required reading for those in policy circles who routinely deal with strategies to combat terrorism."

  —**Dirk Vandewalle, Associate Professor of Government, Dartmouth College**

"As we face a global crisis of increased intolerance and exclusion, Leena makes a compelling case for a radical nonviolent approach to defeating terrorism that transforms our current oppressive measures into opportunities for greater peacefulness. Full of unorthodox approaches like invoking the use of religion as an antidote for violent extremism; exploring untapped collaboration between civil society, business, and the military; and even using love to demobilize a terrorist group—this is an important contribution and fascinating read that defies disciplines!"

—**Kavita N. Ramdas, Director, Women's Rights Program, Open Society Foundations; Strategy Advisor, MADRE; cofounder of KNR Sisters; and former Strategic Advisor to the President, Ford Foundation**

"This is an insightful book. Compassion is not a word generally associated with terrorism, but the message needs to be heard. Bravo, Leena!"

—**John Marks, coeditor of *Common Ground on Terrorism* and founder and former President, Search for Common Ground**

"It could easily be argued that compassion is the number one leadership skill. Leena's suggestion of leading with compassion provides possibility for bringing opposing forces together. It is more than time for the world to recognize our shared humanity and Leena inspires us to do just that!"

—**J'Lein Liese, PhD, Managing Partner, Equanimity Leadership Solutions, and President, Foundation for Global Leadership, Inc.**

COMPASSIONATE COUNTER TERRORISM

The Power of Inclusion in Fighting Fundamentalism

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Compassionate Counterterrorism

For all the

radical peace-builders,

change-makers, and

social entrepreneurs

seeding peace

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CONTENTS

PART III

PREFACE

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO, I was a senior at New York University volunteering at Ground Zero. After receiving my assigned volunteer station, I hesitated but opted to stay silent. *After spending months pulling human remains out of rubble, how would they react when I told them it was Ramadan and that I was Muslim and fasting?* As I served food and drinks to the rescue workers—who good-naturedly and relentlessly tried to persuade me to take a break and eat with them at various intervals—I wondered how long I would be able to defer. "I will! I will! Later!" I kept promising. Twelve hours into the day, my discernibly evasive excuses were categorically rejected. I felt afraid. Confused. Betrayed. Angered by what my religion had come to represent, and at those brandishing their perverted version of it. Finally, I timidly confessed my reasons for abstaining from food and water. A female Red Cross worker stared at me for a few seconds. Then she held my shoulders pulling me towards her. We hugged. It was a beautiful moment of shared humanity that was implicit in its power.

Back in my native Bahrain a few years later, in 2005, I befriended a group of US Navy SEALs. On June 28, three months into their deployment, they lost half of their platoon during an ambush in Afghanistan. Emotionally charged conversations ensued for months as the group grieved and tried to make sense of their loss. Only one member, Marcus Luttrell, managed to escape, and he went on to write

the bestselling memoir *Lone Survivor,* which was turned into a Hollywood blockbuster. As I attempted, in both my personal and professional lives, to suture the growing lacerations between Islam and the West, I obsessively self-questioned: *How do I explain what compels individuals to such violent extremism, even—and especially—towards their own people, in the name of my religion? And, more importantly, how can we prevent them from doing so?* "Prevent" being the operative word.

It's easy for some people to dismiss the more liberal Muslims, such as myself, as "cultural Muslims," whereas the "real Muslims" are the fundamentalists insidiously trying to impose a global caliphate. I've debated as much with one of those US Navy SEALs, who has, over the years, expressed increasingly anti-Muslim sentiments—despite his personal affection for me as an individual. I later had the opportunity to dedicate two years to researching the question that had possessed me: What causes violent radicalization, and could nonmilitary interventions serve as a more powerful first line of defense? During this period at Dartmouth College, which I spent as an international Fulbright scholar, I was surprised to uncover patterns of unbelievable contradictions among so-called Muslim terrorist martyrs, operatives, and, in some cases, even leaders. In an academic setting, however, one is typically steered towards being research oriented rather than solutions oriented. More than a decade later, this book attempts to satiate the need to contribute to a more sustainable prevention of violent extremism.

INTRODUCTION

The three freedoms which all human beings crave—freedom from want, freedom from war or large-scale violence, and freedom from arbitrary or degrading treatment—are closely interconnected. There is no long-term security without development. There is no development without security.

—KOFI ANNAN, former UN Secretary General[1]

IF WE LOOK to the data on how terrorist groups end, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), an analysis of 586 terrorist groups that operated between 1970 and 2007, found that repressive counterterrorism measures enforced by military and security agents achieved the least success with religious terrorist organizations—contributing to the demise of only 12 percent.[2] However, this book is less concerned with defeating terrorist organizations. Rather, it seeks to pinpoint what makes those organizations so appealing to recruits in the first place.

Assuming that our goal is to defeat terrorism and ensure greater universal human security, the central thesis of this book is that a long-term sustainable solution to counterterrorism necessitates a

pivotal emphasis on social, political, and economic inclusion. Why? Simply because humanizing counterterrorism forces us to confront the underlying conditions that lead to violent extremism and terror-prone environments—the disease, rather than the symptoms. What are these conditions, and how do we transform them to create greater peacefulness? These are the questions *Compassionate Counterterrorism* attempts to answer.

In writing this book, I wanted to make terrorism accessible to a wider audience, in the way that books like *Freakonomics* and *Nudge* enticed us into the fascinating field of behavioral economics. The intellectually curious reader and concerned global citizen will find that this book curates a rich collection of diversely sourced data and materials and is peppered with insightful anecdotes, personal reflections, and narratives that bring the data to life. In a way, it mirrors my own multidisciplinary background; it traverses politics, business, development, and spirituality. My hope is that beyond the academic community, its appeal embraces a mainstream audience, including entrepreneurs, businesses, development agencies, and policymakers. And mostly—despite the limitations of finite time—I hope that it is an enabler in making our individual investments in collective human security somewhat more accessible.

The book is divided into three parts. Although some academics and other experts may be familiar with the history of Islam and the Middle East in Part I, and others may be well-acquainted with the commonly cited drivers of terrorism in Part II, the distillation and interwoven information and narratives provided are important in framing Part III of this book; therefore, I recommend reading the chapters sequentially. Moreover, in disassociating the "Islamic State" from religion, I refer to them using the Arabic acronym Daesh throughout this book.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

An Islamic militant walks into a bar and hires a stripper. One week later, he blows himself up. Does his act count as terrorism? According to a West Point Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) study, over 85 percent of the "Islamic" militants in their dataset had no formal religious education.[3] Half of the foreign-trained fighters (FTFs) traveling from other countries to join Daesh in Iraq and Syria did not even known how to pray, according to a United Nations (UN) Counter-Terrorism Centre study, while only 16 percent even believed in the idea of establishing an Islamic State or caliphate in the Levant.[4] How do we reconcile contradictions between why someone says they do something and their real motivations? Moreover, if terrorism is a form of psychological fear and intimidation, should the very same actions be held to different standards when perpetrated by a "legitimate" actor versus an "illegitimate" actor? **Chapter 1** frames the controversies around our definitions of terrorism and covers a brief historical overview of the major turning points for terrorism, which lead us to present day.

Understanding contemporary violent Islamism necessitates a historical understanding of the *Game-of-Thrones*-like barbarism the advent of seventh-century Islam sought to remedy and reform in the first place. **Chapter 2** covers this history in brief, introduces the spiritual godfathers of fundamentalism, and explains why the reinstatement of a modern-day caliphate represents a nostalgia for the Islamic Empire's Golden Age of ascendancy. Following this is **Chapter 3**, which contextualizes the post-colonial baggage, as it were, and the failures of Arab nationalism to remedy it—providing the perfect confluence of circumstances for Islam to be transformed from a religion into a political method of sustaining un-Islamic regimes.

Although the leaders of terrorist organizations may be ideologically driven, **Chapters 4–6** focus specifically on the nonideological drivers of violent extremism—"the why," if you will. It is largely

accepted based on diverse sources of multilateral, military, and academic research and data that these drivers exist. Therefore, it is in our self-interest to acknowledge them if we are to be active participants in ensuring our own security. **Chapter 4** focuses on the spiritual incongruence between the nonobservant behaviors of so-called "Muslim" suicide attackers and their self-proclaimed religious motivations. **Chapter 5** captures the role of economic exclusion and inequality—rather than poverty in isolation—and how current military interventions exacerbate the systemic and deeply entrenched conditions that we seek to overcome. Similarly, **Chapter 6** provides evidence of the potency of social exclusion in violent radicalization, and why, rather than drive them out, we need to reintegrate the extremists into the folds of society. Acknowledging that many marginalized groups have not turned to terrorism, this chapter also reflects on other influencing factors like empathy and social injustice.

Chapter 7 may be emotionally difficult to read for some; it is both a factual and spiritual reflection on ethics, compassion, absolutism, and moral humility. In failing to recognize the perils of dehumanization and the justification of pursuing what we believe to be a noble outcome using immoral means, have we inadvertently embodied what we are fighting? Is counterterrorism simply terrorism by another name? Prior to being rendered stateless for his vocal political dissent in Saudi Arabia, Osama Bin Laden was described as a mild-mannered conflict arbitrator and incompetent idealist. What triggered Bin Laden's transformation into one of the world's most nefarious and destructive terrorists?

In seeking practical solutions, **Chapter 8** looks at the data and evidence around the counterproductiveness of current counterterrorism strategies so we can better design policies that don't manifest like a hydra—multiplying problems and grievances that take us one step forwards and hurl us three steps back. **Chapter 9** displaces the common rhetoric of Islam as the fountainhead of fundamentalism—reframing it instead as a solution. Examples of peace practitioners and former extremists who have used the Quran to successfully deradicalize the

likes of the chief imam of Boko Haram are highlighted, and this chapter cautions against the pitfalls of counternarrative campaigns.

Chapters 10–12 look to social entrepreneurship, public sector innovation, business solutions, and community interventions that have used the power of political, social, and economic inclusion to prevent violent extremism, making the case for these interventions and the need to support them with a greater mobilization of resources.

If terrorism is largely defined as the achievement of political objectives through using violence and intimidation, then we may consider how political accommodation and inclusion can inhibit or even end support for terrorist organizations. **Chapter 10** looks at how countries like Indonesia—where the world's largest Muslim population resides, numbering around 225 million people—massively decreased terrorism while paradoxically becoming more overtly religious, and how the Moroccan model of religious education has ranked it among the countries suffering "no impact from terrorism," while Moroccan immigrants in Europe are among those most susceptible to violent radicalization.[5] And with youth "forming the backbone of many paramilitary and terrorist organizations," this chapter also shares examples of youth engagement through political and civic participation.[6]

Chapter 11 uncovers community-wide inclusive policies that have made cities like Mechelen resilient to radicalization—despite having the largest Muslim population in Belgium. Other examples capture the power of love and compassion in demobilizing terrorists whatever end of the spectrum they fall on: from Neo-Nazis to Black Septemberists (a ruthless terrorist group responsible for the infamous 1972 Munich Olympics massacre).

Chapter 12 explores the untapped role of business and entrepreneurship and highlights examples of development-based interventions that have successfully deterred terrorist recruitment—including some of the pitfalls of poor implementation. **Chapter 13** concludes with the economics of peace and proposes a reframing and reinvention of our current approach to counterterrorism—challenging us to

abandon self-imposed limitations and preconceived notions on what counterterrorism solutions should and could look like. Central to this refreshed approach to counterterrorism is the importance of collaborative, synchronized efforts between unlikely bedfellows—which leverages the social capital and human expertise of the peace-building community and pairs it with the military's resources and aptitude for innovation and the strategic and financial muscle of mission-driven business approaches.

This book is my humble contribution to addressing one of our most urgent global threats. And although, at times, I may be critical of policies, it is to advance progress on an issue I am deeply passionate about, rather than to simply criticize or alienate politicians. I also wish to highlight the distinction between peoples, races, and religions and the actions of the governments that represent them.

And finally, in referring to the Prophet Muhammad and other prophets named in the book, it is customary in Islamic tradition to invoke blessings upon them by saying "Peace be upon him" or (pbuh) after their name. In this book, I consider this implicit and for the reader to utter as appropriate. Also, recall that in disassociating the "Islamic State" from religion, I refer to them using the Arabic acronym Daesh throughout this book.

PART I

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1

WHO IS THE
TERRORIST?

IN HIS 2010 TED talk "Superheroes Inspired by Islam," a fellow Arab, Muslim social entrepreneur, and psychologist, Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa, recalls a lecture he gave in Kuwait on the biological basis of behavior. His students were handed two articles: one from the *New York Times* and the other from *New York* magazine. He took out the names of the writers and other details, leaving only the facts. The first article was about a group called "The Party of God" that wanted to ban Valentine's Day—red was outlawed and any boys and girls caught flirting were to be married off immediately. The second article described a woman's complaints against six bearded men who pulled up in three minivans to interrogate her for talking to a man who wasn't related to her. Dr. Naif's students were asked to identify the locations of the two incidents.[1] Can you guess where they took place?

In unanimous agreement, the class determined the first incident was definitely in Saudi Arabia. The second, they debated, was either in Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan. Astonishingly, they learned that the first