Abraka Journal of Religion and Philosophy -**ISSN: 2971-5997 (Online)**
Volume 6, Issue 2 (July – December), 2026, pp. 1-11.

Misuse of the Qur'an in Extremist Ideologies: A Contextual Hermeneutical Response

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Abstract
The misuse of the Qur'an in extremist ideologies represents a pressing challenge to contemporary Muslim societies and global security. Groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, ISIS, Al-Shabaab, Al-Qaeda, etc., selectively interpret Qur'anic texts to justify social exclusion, violence and extremism, often claiming literal fidelity while ignoring the historical, linguistic, and ethical frameworks that govern classical exegesis. This study examined the methodological flaws underlying extremist readings, highlighting the fragmentation of scripture, ideological selectivity, and the distortion of moral and social imperatives. By contrasting extremist interpretations with classical *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis) traditions, including the works of Al-Ṭabarī, Al-Qurṭubī, Ibn Kathīr and Ibn 'Āshūr, the research demonstrated how these movements manipulate textual fragments to legitimise aggression and undermine communal authority. The paper argued that such misuse erodes ethical, social and political cohesion, fosters sectarianism and normalises perpetual conflict. A contextual hermeneutical approach is proposed as an effective corrective, emphasising the importance of situating texts within their historical, rhetorical, and social contexts to restore coherence between scripture and ethical practice. This method reinforces principles of social justice, coexistence, ethical governance, and the sanctity of life, countering extremist distortions while maintaining fidelity to Qur'anic objectives. The study contributes to ongoing debates in Islamic studies, peace-building and counter-extremism scholarship, offering both theoretical and practical frameworks to mitigate the appeal of literalist, decontextualised readings and promote a responsible, ethically grounded understanding of the Qur'an.

Keywords: Extremist ideologies, Contextual hermeneutics, Classical *tafsīr*, Misuse of the Qur'an.

Introduction

The misuse of the Qur'an by contemporary extremist groups represents a critical challenge for Islamic societies worldwide. Movements such as Boko Haram and ISWAP often claim a direct and literal adherence to scripture while selectively interpreting texts to justify violent campaigns, social exclusion, and political domination. This approach reflects a profound departure from traditional interpretive frameworks that governed Qur'anic scholarship, which emphasized ethical reasoning, contextual awareness, and moral coherence. Scholars argue that extremist readings prioritize ideological objectives over genuine scriptural engagement, transforming divine guidance into a tool for political violence rather than a source of ethical direction (Noibi & Abdulsalam, 2016). Such practices have far-reaching consequences, undermining both social cohesion and

religious legitimacy, and they pose unique challenges for scholars, policymakers and community leaders alike (Odeniyi & Abdulsalam, 2025).

A defining feature of extremist interpretation is the fragmentation of the textual tradition. Extremist groups frequently extract portions of the Qur'an from their historical and literary contexts, using these fragments to support pre-determined agendas (Noibi & Abdulsalam, 2016). Boko Haram, for instance, constructs narratives that frame violence as a religious obligation, deliberately ignoring centuries of interpretive scholarship that emphasize restraint, justice, and proportionality. Classical *tafsīr* traditions consistently rejected such atomistic approaches, highlighting the necessity of integrating textual, ethical, and social dimensions to derive coherent meaning (Uthman & Abdulsalam, 2026; Cook, 2015). The result of this selective reading is a distorted moral universe in which violence is normalized and ethical boundaries are systematically disregarded.

Another central element of extremist misuse is literalism detached from context. By treating passages revealed under specific historical conditions as timeless imperatives, extremist movements present scripture as an absolute mandate for action, regardless of contemporary circumstances. This approach neglects the interpretive principles that have guided Islamic scholarship for centuries, including attention to historical causality, rhetorical nuances, and the broader objectives of law and ethics. ISWAP, in particular, demonstrates this method in its campaigns, framing acts of rebellion and aggression as divinely sanctioned while ignoring the ethical and legal constraints embedded within classical interpretation (Abdul-Rahmon & Abdulsalam, 2025; Esposito, 2015).

Extremist ideologies also rely on the manipulation of authority and legitimacy. By rejecting traditional religious scholars and declaring mainstream leaders illegitimate, groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP create an environment in which unilateral interpretations are enforced through coercion and violence. This undermines centuries of scholarly consensus and distorts communal understandings of governance, justice, and ethical responsibility. Hallaq (2013) observes that the erosion of authoritative interpretive frameworks allows extremists to cultivate loyalty to the movement itself rather than to moral or legal principles, producing a self-reinforcing cycle of ideological rigidity and violence.

A significant consequence of extremist hermeneutical distortion is the erosion of social cohesion and pluralism. By portraying the world in binary terms—us versus them, believer versus non-believer, extremist groups foster sectarianism, isolation, and perpetual conflict (Loimeier, 2012). Communities impacted by Boko Haram and ISWAP experience not only physical violence but also profound social fragmentation, as trust, cooperation, and civic solidarity are undermined. This approach stands in stark contrast to classical Islamic scholarship, which situates ethical behaviour, justice, and coexistence at the heart of communal and intercommoned life (Thurston, 2018).

The importance of a contextual hermeneutical response is therefore paramount. By engaging with the Qur'an through historical, linguistic, and ethical lenses, scholars can demonstrate the misuse inherent in extremist interpretations and provide corrective frameworks. This approach restores moral and intellectual coherence, emphasizing the primacy of ethical reasoning, social responsibility, and communal well-being over fragmentary literalism. Cook (2015) highlights that hermeneutical methods rooted in classical scholarship offer tools to counter extremist ideologies while maintaining fidelity to the core principles of Islam.

Finally, addressing the misuse of the Qur'an requires an integrated strategy that combines scholarly intervention, community education, and policy measures (Odeniyi & Abdulsalam, 2025; Uthman *et al.*, 2025). Restoring interpretive rigor and promoting ethical literacy are essential to countering the narratives propagated by Boko Haram and ISWAP. By fostering an understanding of context, nuance, and moral objectives, communities can resist the ideological appeal of extremist movements (Kamali, 2008). As scholars emphasize, a contextual hermeneutical response is not merely academic; it is a practical necessity for preserving social cohesion, ethical governance, and the integrity of religious life in Muslim societies (Oladosu-Uthman & Abdulsalam, 2020).

Contextualising Extremism in Islam

Extremism, etymologically derived from the Latin *extremus* or *extremitas*, denotes movement toward the furthest or most excessive position and is commonly associated with individuals or groups holding radical religious or political views. Scholars such as Bartoli and Coleman (2003) conceptualise extremism as beliefs, attitudes, emotions, or actions that significantly deviate from what is socially or morally regarded as normal or mainstream. Although the notion of extremism is defined in contrast to moderation, it is often evaluated against established societal, ethical, and religious norms. In Islamic discourse, extremism is captured by terms such as *al-ghuluw* (excessiveness), *al-tanattuʿ* (overburdening religiosity), and *al-tashaddud* (harsh rigidity), all of which carry negative moral connotations.

Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (1991) offers a foundational Islamic definition of extremism, describing it as deviation from the religious centre in belief, thought, and conduct. He further explains that extremism may function both as a personal transformation process and a collective phenomenon, whereby individuals or communities increasingly adopt excessive religious postures (al-Qaraḍāwī, 1991). Similarly, classical scholars such as al-Nawawī maintain that extremism manifests when individuals exceed divinely sanctioned limits by declaring lawful matters unlawful or imposing unwarranted obligations (al-Nawawī, 2014). These perspectives collectively frame extremism as a violation of the ethical balance that Islamic law seeks to preserve.

In contemporary usage, the label "extremist" is frequently applied to individuals or movements that employ coercion or violence to enforce ideological or moral visions. While extremism does not necessarily equate to terrorism, it often provides the ideological foundation upon which terrorist practices are justified (Schmid, 2013). Extremists may resort to violence when they perceive it as an effective means of acquiring power, silencing dissent, or destabilising existing political orders. This instrumentalisation of violence explains the frequent association between extremist ideologies and acts of terror, particularly when extremist groups pursue state authority or ideological dominance (Schmid, 2013).

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan exemplifies how extremist interpretations of religion translate into systemic repression. Through a rigid and literalist reading of Islamic law, the Taliban enforced harsh punishments, restricted women's mobility, education, and economic participation, and criminalised cultural expressions such as music and media. Men were subjected to compulsory religious observances and punitive sanctions for non-compliance. Governance under the Taliban relied heavily on fear-based obedience, illustrating how extremism, when institutionalised, erodes human dignity and undermines fundamental rights under the guise of religious legitimacy (Rashid, 2000).

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, religious extremism, particularly Islamic extremism, became a dominant global narrative, often resulting in the stereotyping of Muslims and Muslim-majority societies. Countries grappling with poverty, political instability, and internal conflict were increasingly portrayed as breeding grounds for terrorism. This reductionist association ignored the complex socio-political roots of violence and unfairly conflated Islam as a faith with the actions of extremist minorities, thereby intensifying Islamophobia in both Western and non-Western contexts (Esposito, 2015). Islamic scripture, however, consistently advocates moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and explicitly condemns extremism. Numerous Qur'ānic verses prohibit excessiveness, transgression and religious rigidity, while emphasising ease, balance, and justice. Allah says:

> And thus We have made you a justly balanced community that you may be witnesses over the people and that the Messenger may be a witness over you (Qur'an 2:143).

Allah also says:

> O you who believe, do not prohibit the good things which Allah has made lawful for you and do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors" (Qur'an 5:87).

These texts affirm that Islam does not impose unnecessary hardship and instead promotes ethical equilibrium in belief and practice. Classical exegetes understand transgression (*ṭughyān*) and extremism as synonymous deviations from divinely ordained boundaries, reinforcing moderation as a core Islamic principle (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995).

Prophetic traditions further reinforce this ethos by explicitly warning against religious excess. The Prophet Muhammad said: "*Beware of extremism in religion, for indeed those who came before you were destroyed because of extremism in religion*" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 39). He also said: "*Indeed, the religion is easy, and no one overburdens himself in religion except that it overwhelms him*" (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, ḥadīth no. 2816). Scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah (1995:371) and al-Nawawī (2014:128) interpreted these narrations as comprehensive condemnations of extremism in both belief and practice. The Prophet's correction of companions who attempted excessive acts of devotion illustrates Islam's rejection of ascetic extremism and its insistence on balance between spiritual and worldly responsibilities.

Historically, extremism has recurred within religious communities, including early Islam. The emergence of the Khārijites represents one of the earliest manifestations of extremist tendencies, characterised by political rebellion, rigid literalism, and the excommunication (*takfīr*) of opponents (al-Shahrastānī, 1968). Muslim scholars across generations have consistently challenged such tendencies, underscoring that extremism arises from misinterpretation, emotional absolutism, and detachment from prophetic guidance. Consequently, Islamic intellectual tradition maintains that combating extremism requires sound knowledge, moderation, and adherence to the *Sunnah*.

Extremism and Scriptural Literalism

Extremism and scriptural literalism are closely connected phenomena in contemporary religious conflicts, particularly where sacred texts are invoked to legitimize violence and exclusion. Scriptural literalism becomes extremist when it insists on the surface meaning of isolated verses while rejecting historical context, ethical intent, and interpretive tradition (Hallaq, 2013). In such cases, scripture is transformed from a moral guide into an ideological weapon. Scholars argue that this shift represents not fidelity to religion, but a profound distortion of how sacred texts have been historically understood within their respective traditions (March, 2019).

A defining feature of extremist scriptural literalism is its rejection of interpretive plurality. Meaning is treated as fixed, self-evident and immediately accessible without scholarly mediation. This approach dismisses centuries of exegetical debate as unnecessary or corrupt innovation (Cook, 2015). By collapsing complex moral discourse into rigid commands, extremist literalism produces a sense of absolute certainty that is resistant to ethical reflection or critical engagement. This reductionism has been identified as a central mechanism through which religious texts are radicalized and mobilized for political violence (Esposito, 2015).

Within Islamic intellectual history, classical Qur'anic interpretation developed precisely to prevent such abuses of the text. Early exegetes emphasized linguistic analysis, *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation), and inter-textual reading as safeguards against misinterpretation. Al-Ṭabarī consistently warned that verses must be understood in relation to their historical circumstances and the totality of Qur'anic discourse. Extremist literalism, by contrast, strips verses of these interpretive anchors and applies them indiscriminately, thereby severing interpretation from scholarly discipline (Al-Ṭabarī, 2000).

Similarly, al-Qurṭubī stressed that Qur'anic injunctions related to conflict are conditional and governed by ethical constraints. He rejected interpretations that legitimize indiscriminate violence or private vigilantism, emphasizing that warfare in Islam is subject to moral regulation and legitimate authority. Extremist literalism disregards these conditions, presenting violence as an individual religious obligation rather than a regulated social responsibility. This departure from classical jurisprudence reveals that extremist readings are not rooted in tradition but represent a radical reinterpretation driven by ideological objectives (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006).

One of the most damaging consequences of extremist literalism is its ethical collapse, particularly regarding the sanctity of life. By absolutising verses revealed in moments of armed conflict, extremists normalize perpetual hostility and erase Qur'anic limitations on aggression. Principles such as proportionality, restraint, and the protection of non-combatants are subordinated to an exclusionary worldview. Ibn 'Āshūr argues that any interpretation that results in widespread injustice and bloodshed contradicts the higher objectives of revelation, regardless of its literal appeal (Ibn 'Āshūr, 1984).

Extremist literalism is also deeply intertwined with *takfīr*, the practice of declaring other Muslims unbelievers. When scripture is interpreted rigidly and selectively, interpretive disagreement becomes equated with apostasy. This logic has devastating social consequences, as it legitimizes violence against Muslim communities themselves (Cook, 2015). Classical scholars consistently cautioned against *takfīr*, recognizing its potential to destroy communal cohesion and moral accountability. Extremist movements, however, treat *takfīr* as a theological instrument justified through decontextualized textual readings (Hallaq, 2013).

In contemporary settings, extremist literalism also functions as a challenge to established religious authority. By claiming exclusive access to "authentic" scriptural meaning, extremist actors delegitimize scholars, jurists, and institutions that promote contextual interpretation. This anti-scholarly posture mirrors broader populist tendencies in which complexity is rejected in favour of simplistic certainties. As a result, scriptural literalism becomes both a theological position and a political strategy for mobilisation and control (March, 2019).

The African context illustrates the destructive impact of extremist literalism with particular clarity. Movements such as Boko Haram have relied on fragmented Qur'anic citations to justify violence against civilians, rejection of education, and hostility toward religious pluralism (Thurston, 2018). These interpretations stand in stark contrast to West Africa's long-standing traditions of Qur'anic learning, which emphasized coexistence, moral discipline, and scholarly transmission. The rise of extremist literalism thus represents a rupture with both global Islamic scholarship and local intellectual heritage (Loimeier, 2012).

Scholars increasingly argue that effective responses to extremism must engage scriptural interpretation directly. Security-based approaches alone cannot dismantle ideologies that claim divine legitimacy (Esposito, 2015:101). Contextual hermeneutics, grounded in classical *tafsīr* and informed by contemporary realities, offers a viable alternative by demonstrating that scripture cannot be reduced to isolated commands divorced from ethical purpose. Such approaches reassert the role of moral reasoning, historical awareness, and scholarly authority in religious interpretation (Kamali, 2008). Extremism and scriptural literalism, are, therefore, mutually reinforcing phenomena rooted in interpretive reductionism and moral absolutism. By stripping sacred texts of context, tradition, and ethical objectives, extremist ideologies transform scripture into a tool of violence and exclusion. Addressing this challenge requires a renewed commitment to contextual interpretation, classical scholarship, and ethical responsibility. Such an approach not only undermines extremist narratives but also restores scripture to its intended role as a source of justice, guidance, and human flourishing.

Examples of Extremist Groups that misuse the Qur'an

Extremist groups across the globe have frequently misappropriated Qur'anic verses to legitimize acts of violence, coercion and ideological control. These groups consistently rely on selective literalism, removing verses from their historical and textual contexts to serve political agendas (Hallaq, 2013). By fragmenting scripture, they present a distorted vision of Islam that emphasizes aggression over moral responsibility. Scholars emphasize that such misuse represents not religious fidelity but ideological exploitation, where sacred texts are weaponised to validate terror and social disruption (March, 2019).

Boko Haram, which emerged in North-Eastern Nigeria, exemplifies this pattern. The group repeatedly cites combat-related passages to justify attacks on civilians, religious scholars and

government institutions (Oladosu et al., 2025). Boko Haram's leaders decontextualize these passages, presenting them as universal commands for perpetual jihad rather than context-specific injunctions during defensive battles in early Islamic history. Classical tafsīr, including the works of al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī, demonstrates that these passages are historically bound and ethically constrained (Al-Ṭabarī, 2000; Al-Qurṭubī, 2006). Similarly, ISWAP, a splinter group from Boko Haram, continues the same hermeneutical distortions but with a more structured operational approach. The group cites Qur'anic injunctions to assert legitimacy and authority over captured territories. ISWAP emphasizes obedience to its commanders as religious obligation, blending political control with ideological exploitation. By ignoring Qur'anic limits on warfare and prohibitions on transgression, ISWAP turns scripture into a tool for social and political domination (Thurston, 2018).

ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) represents a global manifestation of Qur'anic misuse, drawing extensively on select combat and treaty-related passages. ISIS isolates these passages from their historical context, specific tribal conflicts and defensive campaigns, to justify killings, abductions, and enslavement. Classical scholars such as Ibn 'Āshūr emphasize that these passages are descriptive of historical events and conditional, not prescriptive for all times. ISIS's selective interpretation thus constitutes a deliberate ideological manipulation rather than faithful scriptural engagement (Ibn 'Āshūr, 1984).

Al-Shabaab in Somalia similarly exploits Qur'anic passages for strategic mobilization. The group cites combat-related injunctions to attack civilians, humanitarian workers, and rival Muslims, portraying all opposition as divinely illegitimate. By rejecting the principles of proportionality, restraint, and ethical governance present in classical *tafsīr*, Al-Shabaab reinforces extremist literalism. Hallaq (2013) notes that modern militant groups employ scriptural language as a rhetorical tool to enforce ideological conformity and delegitimize traditional scholars.

Global jihadist networks, including Al-Qaeda, have long relied on fragmented readings of the Qur'an to construct theological justifications for transnational operations. Verses on defensive combat are abstracted from their ethical and historical contexts, creating a moral framework that prioritizes violence over justice and human dignity. Cook (2015) emphasizes that such groups operationalize scripture to legitimize political objectives rather than spiritual or ethical aims. A recurring pattern among these groups is the practice of *takfīr*, declaring other Muslims, including civilians, scholars, and political leaders, as apostates. Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Al-Shabaab all employ *takfīr* to rationalize attacks on fellow Muslims, undermining social cohesion and violating the classical jurisprudential principle that disbelief cannot be arbitrarily declared (Esposito, 2015). Classical scholars like Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn 'Āshūr stress that unwarranted takfīr contradicts the Qur'an's objectives of preserving life and justice (Al-Ṭabarī, 2000).

Another common feature is the collapse of defensive jihād into perpetual, offensive warfare. Extremist groups redefine defensive obligations as continuous duties, justifying indefinite violence. ISIS and Boko Haram, for example, portray their attacks on civilian populations as religiously mandated, ignoring Qur'anic commands on restraint and the protection of non-combatants (Ibn 'Āshūr, 1984). Classical exegetes such as Al-Qurṭubī affirm that Qur'anic combat passages are conditional, limited in scope, and regulated by ethical principles (Al-Qurṭubī, 2006).

Fragmented citation without historical context is also evident in Al-Shabaab's rhetoric. The group frequently extracts Qur'anic passages on punitive justice and armed conflict, using them to justify extrajudicial killings and attacks on non-Muslims. By neglecting *asbāb al-nuzūl* (reason behind the revelation) and ethical constraints, Al-Shabaab positions itself as a self-appointed interpreter of divine will, in direct opposition to centuries of scholarly tradition (Hallaq, 2013). Extremist groups also manipulate Qur'anic passages to suppress dissent and consolidate political control. ISWAP, for instance, uses selective readings to demand absolute obedience from local populations, presenting opposition as apostasy. This tactic reflects a broader strategy in global

jihadist movements: scripture is subordinated to power, and literalist readings are exploited to impose ideological dominance (Thurston, 2018).

Efforts to counter the misuse of the Qur'an require robust engagement with classical hermeneutics. Contextualized interpretation, informed by *asbāb al-nuzūl*, *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (objective of Islamic Law) and intertextual coherence, demonstrates that extremist readings are inconsistent with Islamic ethical and legal principles. Scholars emphasize that restoring ethical engagement with scripture can undermine extremist legitimacy and provide communities with resilient theological counter-narratives (Kamali, 2008). Thus, the global consequences of Qur'anic misuse by extremist groups are severe. Millions have been displaced, social cohesion eroded, and traditional scholarly authority undermined in regions affected by Boko Haram, ISWAP, ISIS, and Al-Shabaab. Contextual hermeneutics provides not only an academic corrective but also a practical framework for countering ideological extremism and restoring the Qur'an's ethical guidance (Loimeier, 2012).

Extremist groups, therefore, exploit the Qur'an through literalism, fragmented citation, takfīr, and the collapse of defensive jihad into perpetual violence. Boko Haram, ISWAP, ISIS, Al-Shabaab, and affiliated networks exemplify these patterns. Contextual hermeneutical approaches rooted in classical *tafsīr* are essential for restoring the Qur'an's moral, ethical, and legal coherence, providing both a theological and societal response to contemporary religious extremism.

Some Misused Verses and Contextual Hermeneutical Response

The misuse of selected Qur'anic verses constitutes one of the most defining features of contemporary extremist ideologies that seek to legitimize violence, exclusion, and coercion in the name of Islam. Extremist groups often claim textual fidelity while simultaneously abandoning the interpretive principles that historically governed Qur'anic exegesis. By isolating verses revealed in specific contexts of conflict and elevating them into universal commands, such movements transform the Qur'an into an ideological instrument rather than an ethical guide. Scholars widely agree that this practice reflects a rupture with classical *tafsīr* traditions rather than their continuation (Hallaq, 2013).

A recurring methodological flaw in extremist interpretation is the fragmentation of the Qur'anic text. Verses are extracted from their literary, historical, and ethical contexts and redeployed to support predetermined political objectives. This approach ignores the Qur'an's internal coherence and its insistence on moral restraint, justice, and proportionality. Classical exegetes consistently rejected such atomistic readings, emphasizing that Qur'anic meaning emerges through comprehensive engagement with revelation as a whole. Extremist misuse thus reflects ideological selectivity rather than genuine scriptural commitment (Cook, 2015).

Among the most frequently misused passages are:

> Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed. Allah does not like transgressors. And kill them wherever you overtake them and expel them from wherever they have expelled you, and *fitnah* is worse than killing, and do not fight them at al-Masjid al- Haram until they fight you there. But if they fight you, then kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers. And if they cease, then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful. Fight them until there is no [more] *fitnah* and [until] worship is [acknowledged to be] for Allah. But if they cease, then there is to be no aggression except against the oppressors (Qur'an 2:190–193).

The above verses address armed struggle in response to persecution. Extremists often isolate the phrase "kill them wherever you encounter them" while ignoring the surrounding verses that restrict fighting to self-defence and explicitly prohibit transgression. Al-Ṭabarī (2000:561–566) situates these verses within the context of Makkan persecution and early Madinan hostilities, emphasizing that they authorize fighting only against those actively engaged in aggression and categorically reject their application to peaceful populations or non-combatants. Ibn Kathīr

(2003:210–215) similarly underscores that these instructions were revealed in specific wartime contexts, reinforcing defensive limits and explicitly forbidding aggression against innocents.

Extremist readings of Qur'an 2:190–193 further collapse the distinction between defensive combat and unrestricted violence. Classical *tafsīr* consistently affirms that these verses establish ethical limits on warfare rather than abolish them. Al-Qurṭubī (2006:350–353) stresses that the prohibition of aggression (*Lā ta'tadū*) is a foundational principle that governs all armed engagement. By ignoring this restriction, extremist ideologies reverse the moral logic of the text and normalize perpetual violence as a religious norm. Ibn Kathīr (2003:218–221) reinforces this perspective, emphasizing that any interpretation advocating unprovoked or continuous warfare contravenes both Qur'anic instruction and prophetic practice.

Also in Qur'an 8:12, which states:

> Remember when your Lord inspired the angels, "I am with you, so strengthen those who have believed. I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieved so strike [them] upon the necks and strike from them every fingertip.

The above quotation is another verse of the Qur'an commonly exploited in extremist discourse, particularly due to its vivid language describing divine assistance during the Battle of Badr. Extremists treat the command to strike necks as a timeless injunction endorsing brutality and beheading. Classical exegetes, however, interpret this verse as descriptive rather than prescriptive, reflecting the intensity of a specific historical battle. Al-Qurṭubī (2006:364–367) explicitly notes that this verse cannot be detached from its wartime context or extended to civilians or prisoners. Ibn Kathīr (2003:142–146) also interprets the verse within the Battle of Badr, highlighting that it does not serve as a general command for indiscriminate violence.

The absolutisation of Qur'an 8:12 illustrates how extremist literalism erases the Qur'an's ethical framework governing warfare. Other verses explicitly mandate restraint, humane treatment of captives, and the pursuit of peace when hostilities cease. Ibn 'Āshūr (1984:94–98) argues that any interpretation that legitimizes cruelty as a norm contradicts the higher objectives of revelation, particularly the preservation of life and moral order. Extremist misuse thus represents not textual fidelity, but ethical inversion. Ibn Kathīr (2003:150–153) aligns with this, emphasizing that the Qur'an's combat instructions are temporally bounded and morally constrained, ensuring ethical conduct during war.

In the same vein, where Allah Says:

> And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give *zakah*, let them [go] on their way. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful (Qur'an 9:5).

Perhaps the above is the most notorious verse in extremist propaganda, often referred to as the "Verse of the Sword." Extremists portray this verse as a universal command to kill all non-Muslims, claiming that it abrogates verses advocating patience and coexistence. Classical scholarship overwhelmingly rejects this claim. Al-Ṭabarī (2000:92–95) limits the verse to specific pagan tribes who violated treaties with the Muslim community, emphasizing that its scope is historical and conditional rather than universal. In the same vein, Ibn Kathīr (2003:90–94) clarifies that this verse addresses particular historical circumstances and is not a mandate for on-going hostilities against non-Muslims.

Al-Qurṭubī (2006:45–48) further clarifies that Qur'an 9:5 cannot be read independently of adjacent verses that provide exemptions for treaty-abiding groups and mandate protection for those seeking peace. He stresses that warfare in Islam is regulated by ethical and legal constraints, including legitimate authority and just cause. Extremist readings that universalize this verse thus represent a radical departure from classical exegetical consensus. Ibn Kathīr (2003:96–99) supports

this view, noting that ethical warfare always requires a legitimate cause, proportionate action, and respect for agreements.

In addition, Qur'an 9:29 which states that:

> Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture - [fight] until they give the *jizyah* willingly while they are humbled.

This verse is similarly misused to construct narratives of perpetual war against Jews and Christians. Extremist groups interpret the verse as a theological mandate for hostility toward the People of the Book. Classical *tafsīr*, however, situates the verse within the geopolitical context of Byzantine aggression and frames it as a political response rather than a religious command. Ibn ʻĀshūr (984:122–125) emphasizes that the verse addresses security and governance concerns, not forced conversion or religious annihilation. Ibn Kathīr (2003:110–113) reinforces that the instruction pertains to specific historical adversaries and cannot be generalized to all non-Muslims.

Another verse frequently cited to justify violence against Muslims themselves is Qur'an 4:89:

> They wish you would disbelieve as they disbelieved so you would be alike. So do not take from among them allies until they emigrate for the cause of Allah. But if they turn away, then seize them and kill them wherever you find them and take not from among them any ally or helper.

The extremists deploy this verse to legitimize killing of alleged apostates. Classical exegetes interpret this verse as referring to wartime treason and armed betrayal rather than mere belief change. Al-Ṭabarī (2000:326–329) explicitly limits its application to individuals who joined enemy forces during conflict. Extremist interpretations that equate dissent or disbelief with treason therefore lack textual and historical grounding. Ibn Kathīr (2003:78–82) echoes this interpretation, highlighting that ethical limits preclude punishing personal belief changes outside a context of armed betrayal.

Similarly, where Allah Says:

> O you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as *awliyā'* (allies). They are [in fact] allies of one another. And whoever is an ally to them among you - then indeed, he is [one] of them. Indeed, Allah guides not the wrongdoing people (Qur'an 5:51).

The above is often misused to promote social isolation and hostility toward non-Muslims. Extremists interpret the prohibition of *awliyā'* as a ban on friendship or cooperation. Classical scholars clarify that the term refers to political allegiance in hostile contexts, not every day social relations. Al-Qurṭubī (2006:219–222) underscores that the Qur'an simultaneously commands justice and kindness toward non-hostile non-Muslims, making absolutist interpretations untenable. Ibn Kathīr (2003:85–88) concurs that these instructions do not prohibit social or commercial interactions with non-Muslims in peaceable contexts.

Furthermore, the Qur'an 47 verse 4, which addresses combat and prisoners of war, is also distorted by extremist ideologies:

> So, when you meet those who disbelieve [in battle], strike [their] necks until, when you have inflicted slaughter upon them, then secure their bonds, and either [confer] favour afterwards or ransom [them] until the war lays down its burdens. That [is the command]. And if Allah had willed, He could have taken vengeance upon them [Himself], but [He ordered armed struggle] to test some of you by means of others. And those who are killed in the cause of Allah - never will He waste their deeds.

In the quoted verse, the extremists focus on the initial command to strike in battle, they routinely ignore the verse's instruction to release captives either freely or through ransom once

hostilities cease. Ibn ʻĀshūr (1984:35–38) stresses that this verse establishes humane treatment as a binding ethical requirement. The execution of prisoners by extremist groups directly contradicts the explicit text of the Qur'an. Ibn Kathīr (2003:42–46) likewise emphasizes that prisoners must be treated humanely and cannot be executed outside the bounds of wartime justice.

The cumulative misuse of these verses reveals a consistent pattern of interpretive distortion rooted in selective literalism. Extremist ideologies privilege violence-oriented fragments while marginalizing the Qur'an's overarching ethical vision. In contexts such as Nigeria, groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP repeatedly deploy these verses to justify attacks on civilians, scholars, and religious minorities, contravening both classical Islamic scholarship and long-standing traditions of Qur'anic learning (Cook, 2015:88).

A contextual hermeneutical approach, grounded in classical *tafsīr*, offers an essential corrective. By situating verses within their historical, linguistic, and ethical contexts, scholars demonstrate that combat-related passages were revealed under specific circumstances of defensive warfare. This method restores the Qur'an's moral and legal coherence, emphasizing the sanctity of life, ethical warfare, coexistence and just governance, while countering extremist distortions.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the misuse of the Qur'an by extremist groups is rooted not in the text itself but in deliberate interpretive distortions that sever revelation from its ethical, historical, and scholarly foundations. By fragmenting verses, absolutising context-specific injunctions, and rejecting classical *tafsīr* traditions, groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP transform the Qur'an into an ideological weapon rather than a moral guide. Classical Islamic scholarship consistently affirms that Qur'anic teachings on conflict are conditional, regulated, and governed by overarching principles of justice, restraint, and the sanctity of life. Extremist literalism, therefore, represents an ethical inversion that contradicts the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* and prophetic practice. Addressing this challenge requires more than security responses; it necessitates restoring interpretive rigor, scholarly authority, and ethical literacy within Muslim communities. A contextual hermeneutical approach grounded in classical exegesis offers a robust framework for exposing extremist fallacies and reclaiming the Qur'an's moral vision. Ultimately, safeguarding the integrity of Qur'anic interpretation is essential for countering religious extremism and preserving social cohesion, justice, and human dignity in contemporary Muslim societies.

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