

English Terminology in Muslim-Western Dialogue

neither the list of terms nor the suggested alternatives are exhaustive of the possibilities or contexts

Term	Islamic terrorism
Intended Meaning	Acts of terrorism by individuals who claim to conduct them in the name of Islam
Why a Problem	Implies that terrorism can be Islamic in character, i.e., that the ethos of Islam is compatible with that of terrorism
Impact	Most Muslims feel insulted, wronged, and even angry on hearing expressions which seem to blame terrorism on, or attribute it to, Islam; the term helps terrorists as it reinforces the idea that the West views Islam as a source of evil and openly says so
Alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Terrorism, Terrorists - Terrorism in the name of Islam, Terrorists claiming to be Muslims, Terrorists in/from country X - Takfiri terrorism (<i>Takfir</i> in Arabic means is the act of pronouncing/passing judgment on who is a real Muslim and who is not, a concept that is antithetical to mainstream Islam. Advantage: it clearly denotes a distinction from mainstream Islam. Disadvantage: it introduces a non-English word into popular language, which could be used incorrectly and/or misunderstood.

Term	Islamofacism
Intended Meaning	An authoritarian or oppressive ideology or system of government based on a totalitarian interpretation of Islam
Why a Problem	The linking of Islam and fascism is highly offensive and provocative to the vast majority of Muslims, who love and respect their religion, and do not associate Islam with totalitarianism; it is an oxymoron
Impact	Most Muslims naturally feel insulted, even angry, on hearing expressions which denigrate their religion; the term helps terrorists as it reinforces the idea that the West associates Islam with their most reviled ideologies
Alternatives	- Religious Totalitarianism by group X

Term	Jihad/Jihadists
Intended Meaning	In Western media, this term is almost always linked to acts of violence and is often used to mean terrorism/terrorists
Why a Problem	To Muslims, jihad means the struggle to move closer to God, to live in the way of God – thus it is a positive, predominantly non-violent and personal act by a devoted individual, or jihadi (also mujahed)
Impact	Angers Muslims as it equates a noble religious concept with violence/terrorism; extends the respectability of being true travelers in the way of God to terrorists, who welcome the title; the use of an Islamic term to describe violent acts gives the non-Muslim Westerner the impression that Islam sanctions such violent acts
Alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Terrorism/ Vigilantism/Violence in the name of Islam - Terrorists/Vigilantes/Violent Extremists claiming to be Muslims - Terrorists/ Vigilantes/Violent Extremists from/in country X

Term	Islamists/Islamism
Intended Meaning	In academia, the term Islamist (noun/adj.) denotes a Muslim who seeks a formal role for certain Islamic ideas in a political system, and/or to describe those institutions or principles which uphold this end; in such circles, the term denotes “political Islam” and has neutral implications.
Why a Problem	<p>In mass media, the term is often used to describe a wide spectrum of players without distinction between them, from non-controversial and non-violent groups and individuals who believe that governance of their state should be based on certain Islamic principles, to Islamic political parties (AK in Turkey, Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt), to Islamic political parties-cum-armed-wing (Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine), to would-be Islamic political parties operating in states of relative political anarchy (Taliban), to terrorist or vigilante groups (Al Qaeda and its spawns). There are significant and very serious differences between these groups, e.g., some are advocating democratic states based on certain Islamic values or principles.</p> <p>Alternatively put, the term is often used to describe any one of the following: Islamic activist, extremist, radical, fundamentalist, militant, as well as vigilante or terrorist acting in the name of Islam.</p> <p><u>Note</u>: The adjective “Islamist” doesn’t exist in Arabic, despite its having been around in English for a while – it is translated as “Islamic” .</p>
Impact	Makes mainstream Muslims feel disrespected given its often negative use/association, even resentful when applied to radical movements; angers some Islamic political parties as they are placed in same category as vigilantes and terrorists; makes it difficult for mainstream Muslims to argue or disagree with radical elements because the term is so tightly associated with the religion that they fear appearing to denounce Islam and not only the actions of a specific group
Alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Islamist/Islamism (when the intended use is specifically defined) - Name of group whenever possible - Islamic Politicians/ Islamic Political Activists - Supporters or Proponents of Political Islam - Political Islam/Politicized Islam <p>When not being used to denote a Muslim who seeks a formal role for Islamic ideas in a political system, use the appropriate alternative: Islamic activist, extremist, radical, fundamentalist, militant, or vigilante or terrorist acting in the name of Islam, as appropriate.</p>

Term	Moderate Muslim/Islam
Intended Meaning	A Muslim/ an interpretation of Islam that rejects extremism and terrorism; a Muslim who supports Western foreign policy; a non-practicing Muslim or sometimes even a former Muslim
Why a Problem	<p>Implies that Islam as a whole is by definition intolerant and aggressive; that the majority of Muslims are extremist, intolerant, radical or violent - hence the need to qualify those who are not - rather than the other way around; alternatively put: equates piety with violence and by extension the religion of Islam with inspiring violence – implying that the less Islam consumed, the better</p> <p>Does not allow for the fact that one can be politically “moderate” in a given context, even though they would be seen to take extreme positions on religion; understood by many Muslims to apply to any position on any political issue taken by Muslim individuals or groups that is deemed acceptable by the West</p> <p><u>Note:</u> the adjective “moderate” is not always negative for pious Muslims, given the importance of moderation in Islamic tradition and Muslim association of the term with a positive. Rather, it is a question of how the word is used. For instance, “the moderate majority in Muslim society” does not carry a negative connotation as it does not imply that it is the limited intake of Islam that is making this majority a good thing.</p>
Impact	Offense: “What’s wrong with just being <i>Muslim</i> ?” “Why does Islam need a qualifier to make it alright?” Implies a Muslim who is passionate rather than moderate about their religion is one who takes extreme or exclusive positions.
Alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mainstream or Mainline Muslim/Islam - Name of group or individual - The moderate majority in Muslim society

Term	Secularism/Secular Society
Intended Meaning	A political system in which religion does not dictate to, or interfere with, matters of state; one where religion and politics are formally separated, yet where religious freedom is guaranteed and protected
Why a Problem	<p>This is a tricky term because one of its dictionary definitions is the outright rejection of religion and so is translated in Arabic and other “Muslim” languages as areligiosity/irreligiosity; this can cause conflict because, according to extensive studies of Muslim public opinion, a majority of Muslims want religious principles to be a source of legislation. The term secularization is generally perceived as an attempt to recreate Muslim societies in the West’s image.</p> <p><u>Note:</u> In practice, Western secular states preclude the abolition of religion and religious values and endorse pluralism and religious freedom, even protecting them. In fact, many Western constitutions are based on religious (Christian) values, and many political leaders speak openly about their faith. The French concept of laicism, or laicite, denotes the strict separation of public and private, or non-interference of religion in politics and vice versa (often associated with France and Turkey). This is usually considered a more severe or strict form of secularism. In Turkey and France, laicism actively confines religion to the private sphere.</p>
Impact	Knee-jerk rejection by most Muslims, who are religious and want some role for religion in public life, exacerbating already-prevalent feelings among Muslims that the West has disrespect for their religious values
Alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use “secularism” but indicate intended meaning - Pertaining to this world - Religious Pluralism/Pluralistic Society - Multiculturalism/Multicultural System

Term	Liberal Democracy
Intended Meaning	Generally refers to a democratic system of governance whereby rights are protected by a constitution and include the right to vote; often characterized by tolerance and pluralism
Why a Problem	It is often unclear whether the term "liberal" refers to political values or Western social values or, in fact, whether the two can be separated as such; often understood outside of the West as synonymous with "Western values"
Impact	Many Muslims view this as an attempt to impose Western social values on their societies; promotes an adversarial attitude as it leads to many Muslims fearing the imposition of a Western model of democracy in lieu of allowing a home-grown one to develop
Alternatives	- Democracy

Term	Fatwa
Intended Meaning	An opinion or pronouncement by a trained Islamic jurist, or Mufti
Why a Problem	A fatwa is a legally non-binding opinion, but is often understood in the West to be a religious edict that must be acted upon. It entered Western parlance with the issuance of a fatwa calling for the death of the author, Salman Rushdie, in the 1980s. Thus the general perception is that a fatwa is a death sentence, which feeds into the notion that Islam is a violent religion which does not value "rights of due process" or human life. Another problem that has arisen is that many opinions issued by unqualified persons recently have been called fatwas in the media; calling such pronouncements fatwas lends such opinions a legitimacy they in fact lack.
Impact	Creates the impression that judicial systems in Muslim-majority countries are based on the opinions of religious leaders. Although this is sometimes the case, it is rare; by calling illegitimate opinions fatwas, the person making the pronouncement is automatically being acknowledged as a legitimate religious jurist, or Mufti
Alternatives	- Non-binding opinion by Islamic jurist, or Mufti - Non-binding opinion in Islamic law

Term	Shari'a
Intended Meaning	System of individual and societal conduct that is in accordance with Islamic principles.
Why a Problem	Shari'a is often considered, especially in the West, as an archaic legal system best known for cutting off the hands of thieves and stoning adulterers; it is seen as written in stone and not open for interpretation or customization, and even contrary to universal codes of human rights. In fact, shari'a is the framework from which Islamic law is derived. It is similar to Jewish Halakhah and Catholic Canon Law. Different Islamic schools of jurisprudence have their own ways of interpreting shari'a.
Impact	Offense is taken by many Muslims when it is implied that shari'a is an inequitable system
Alternatives	- Islamic principles

Term	Allah
Intended Meaning	The divine entity whom Muslims worship
Why a Problem	Sounds like a reference to a specifically Muslim divinity, something strange and alien, rather than the Arabic word for God; suggests incorrectly that the Muslim God is different from the Christian or Jewish God; overlooks the fact that Christian and Jewish Arabs also use Allah to refer to God
Impact	Creates unwarranted division or separation between Muslims and non-Muslims; promotes the idea “They are different from us, they worship someone called Allah”
Alternatives	- God

Term	American Muslims
Intended Meaning	Muslims of American citizenship or residence
Why a Problem	Defines people by their religion rather than nationality, which goes against both the American ethos and the concept of nation-state
Impact	Propagates the idea that allegiance of Muslims in the US is to entities/countries outside the US. This distinction is particularly important to indigenous Muslims in the United States e.g. African Americans. <u>Note:</u> when comparing Muslims from different places, for example, the above is not always an issue: e.g. British Muslims as compared with American Muslims is a legitimate and innocuous use of the term.
Alternatives	- Muslim Americans (like African Americans, Chinese Americans, Arab Americans, Native Americans, etc)

Term	War on Terror
Intended Meaning	The Western/US-led military and intelligence effort to stymie, imprison and/or eliminate all militants and groups, including terrorists, who are attacking or planning to attack Western interests and the West itself
Why a Problem	Because all individuals, groups and countries that the West has engaged with in an adversarial manner since the declaration of this war, whether directly or indirectly, have been Muslim, it has created the impression that it is in fact a war on Islam; This term raises the critical question of why terrorist groups that are not Muslim have not been a target in this war. In addition, it is not clear who the “enemy” is or what a victory would look like, and as a result it perpetuates a sense of fear in society and empowers militants who do take violent actions against Western or other targets.
Impact	Many Muslims feel suspicious of all Western (especially US) policies toward them; feelings of mistrust are underscored and Muslims are put in the position of defending themselves as non-terrorists It contributes to the “if you’re not with us, you’re against us” paradigm
Alternatives	- Effort/initiative against Al Qaeda - Anti-Terrorism Measures

Distinctions

Term	Muslim (noun/adj.)	Islamic (adj.)
	Denotes an adherent of Islam or a characteristic of its adherents (descriptive, adj. comparable to “Jewish”)	Denotes the religion or its institutions (prescriptive, comparable to “Judaic”)
Example	A Muslim country is one where the majority of citizens follow the religion of Islam	An Islamic country is one whose political system is based on Islamic law
Why Important	Avoids negative events, acts or ideas being attributed to the religion of Islam itself (rather than its followers)	

Term	Headscarf	Veil
Definition	Worn by many Muslim women to cover their hair in public; usually accompanied by non-revealing clothes	Worn by a small minority of Muslim women to cover face ; usually accompanied by non-revealing clothes
Also Referred to as	Hijab	Niqab
Why Important	“Veil” conjures up “barrier” and has a negative impact on bridge-building efforts <u>Note:</u> neither garment says anything about political viewpoints	

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Search for Common Ground



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