

Muslim Scholars Criticize Terrorism

Bin Laden's interpretation directly challenged

It was the Islamic fatwa that echoed around Europe: Jihadists who resort to terrorism are not earning the blessings of paradise, but an eternity in hellfire.

What was unique about the ruling was that this anti-terrorist firebrand wasn't an ex-Muslim with a grievance or a secular Western scholar, but the face of traditional Islam: gray-bearded, robed Anglo-Pakistani cleric Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri.

"Terrorism is terrorism, violence is violence, and it has no place in Islamic teaching and no justification can be provided for it, or any kind of excuses or ifs or buts," ul-Qadri said in his fatwa pronounced in March 2010 in London and beamed to the world.

Ul-Qadri is part of an elite group of reformists competing against extremists in the battle to define Islam. And they're not shy about turning to ancient Islamic texts to support their anti-terrorism outlook. Ul-Qadri has strong links to the United Kingdom, but his philosophy has followers throughout Europe. They include Muslim leaders such as Bosnian Grand Mufti Mustafa Ceric, who spread the message that a political Islam that preaches death to dissidents has no place in society.

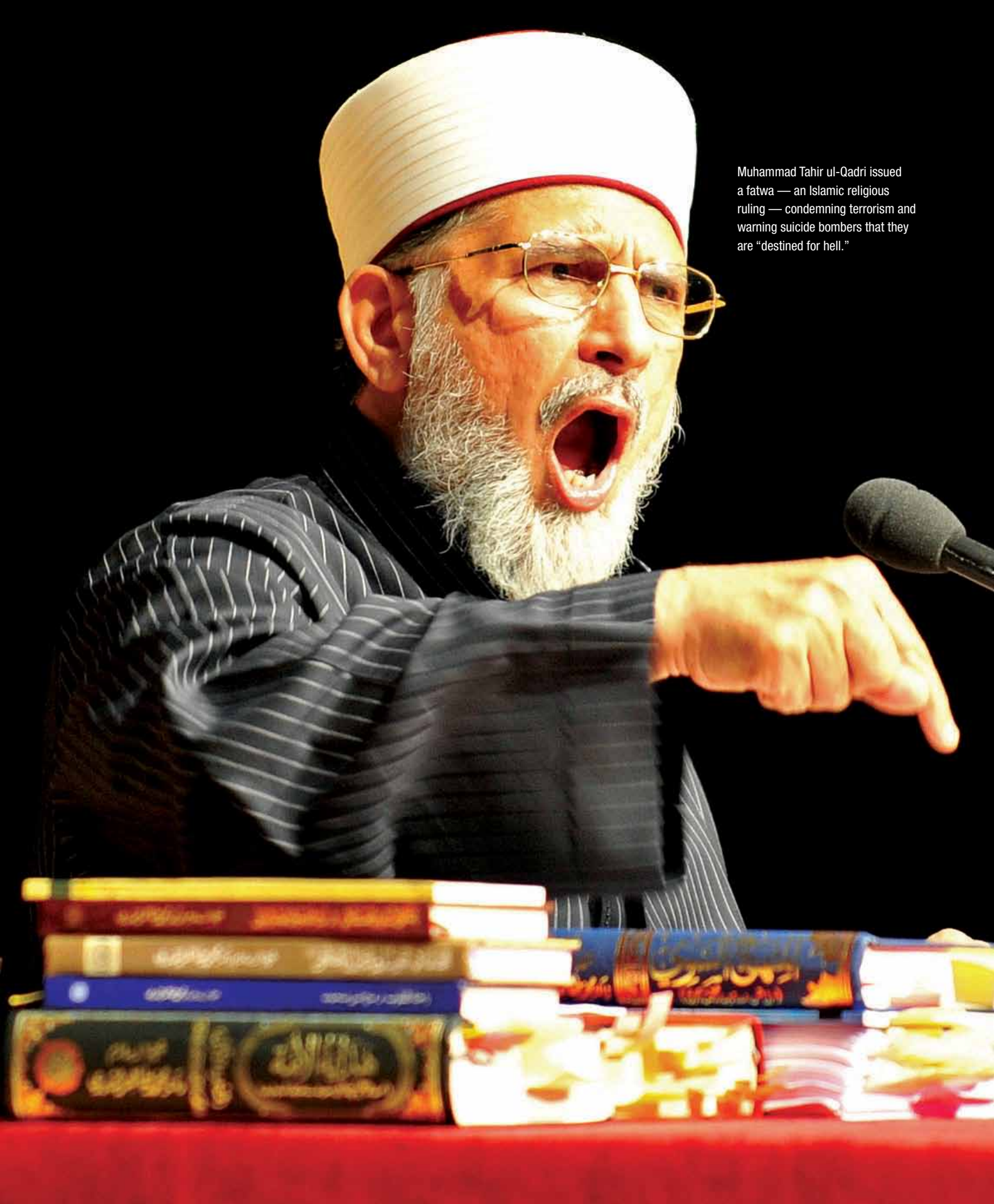
A March 2010 summit — at Mardin Artuklu University in Mardin, Turkey, attended by 15 religious scholars from the Islamic world — set the tone. Ceric and theologians from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and other countries converged in the eastern Turkish town near the Syrian border to challenge the radical interpretation of a 14th century religious text used to incite violence among modern Muslims. Osama bin Laden has regularly used the 14th century fatwa, penned by medieval soldier and scholar Ibn Taymiyya, to justify war against "inauthentic" Middle Eastern governments and their Western allies.

"Anyone who seeks support from this fatwa for killing Muslims or non-Muslims has erred in his interpretation," conference organizers declared at the end of the two-day gathering. "It is not for a Muslim individual or group to declare war or engage in combative jihad ... on their own."

The clerics hope that repeating moderate edicts will erode the spiritual, intellectual and psychological underpinnings of the radical militant creed that has spread to Muslim communities in some of Europe's largest cities. Their message is that current and future terrorists can no longer assume their actions guarantee martyrdom and reward in the next life: In fact, condemnation in this life, and damnation in the next, is the likely outcome of killing in the name of religion.

The Quilliam Foundation, a British anti-terrorism think tank founded by three young Muslims who repudiated violent radicalism, has been pouring out conciliatory articles and interviews since 2008 from its headquarters in a leafy section of central London. Even the foundation's name is loaded with symbolism bespeaking tolerance: It refers to Sheik William Henry Abdullah Quilliam. He was a wealthy 19th century Liverpool solicitor who converted to Islam and built Great Britain's first mosque.

Then there is Turkey's Fethullah Gülen. In a country in which Islamist parties, including the now-banned Refah (Welfare) Party, have gained many adherents, the 69-year-old theologian has staked out moderate ground, most conspicuously on the issues of terrorism and collaboration with Christians and Jews.



Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri issued a fatwa — an Islamic religious ruling — condemning terrorism and warning suicide bombers that they are “destined for hell.”

Gülen's movement has gained popularity among thousands of doctors, lawyers and professionals in the cities, in contrast to the rural recruiting grounds of militant Islamists, the Turkish press reported. Though he has lived mostly in the United States since 1998, he controls a large Turkish network of schools and media outlets in which nearly each Gülen utterance and action is treated with reverence. That has made him suspect in the eyes of some secular Turks, who fear he is trying to spread a politicized version of Islam by stealth.

Secular academics, many expatriates from the Middle East, have also filled the ranks of the anti-extremist movement. Unfortunately, these academics attract criticism from more conservative Muslims. They contend that secular Muslims are too far removed from their home countries, both geographically and philosophically. That raises questions of authenticity among the rank and file back home. The audience from which terrorist leaders most recruit tends to place a high premium on purity, piety and ritual sometimes lacking in the Westernized

hatreds and doctrinal conflicts afflicting the Middle East and South Asia.

One of Quilliam's founders is Maajid Nawaz, a former student radical who liberalized his views during Egyptian imprisonment in 2002. He considers his main adversary "Islamism," which he defines as a political brand of Islam that preaches violence to achieve a religious utopia and which scorns Westerners and Muslim moderates. Nawaz and others admit their statements might not persuade terrorists to give up violence, but they can certainly sway religious people still weighing their options.

"So what we do is say, 'Look, a conservative Muslim who grows his beard and dresses in a certain way and prays five times a day isn't necessarily an Islamist.' That's what we want to do — recast the debate to say you can have a very religious conservative Muslim but he's not an Islamist," Nawaz told the British magazine *The National* in March 2010.

Of course, even these anti-terrorism counterrevolutionaries haven't escape criticism. The Mardin conference organizers and the Quilliam Foundation occasionally enjoy subsidies from their host governments. This has led critics to accuse them of serving a master other than Islam. But despite disparagement from some of their co-religionists, these opponents of violent extremism continue to preach to what they hope is a growing audience in Europe and beyond. Here's a summary of the views of some of the leaders of the anti-terror movement within Islam:

Ceric:

The mufti maintains that the famous 14th century fatwa used to advocate violence has been misinterpreted. He points out that the fatwa was written specifically to spark resistance against nominally Muslim Mongol marauders who were devastating the Middle East at the time. Unfortunately, the Mardin fatwa, as the 14th century declaration is called, became a main scriptural foundation of bin Laden's al-Qaida. The "New Mardin Declaration" urges Muslims to live up to their most peaceful traditions and forswear what conference organizers called "vigilantism." Ceric criticizes scholars who maintain a medieval view of religion and politics. "Most ulema [Islamic scholars] have a problem. They know the classical texts very well, but they don't know the contemporary world that much," he told the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* in March 2010.

ul-Qadri:

The cleric's 600-page fatwa isn't everyday reading, but it has clearly drawn the ire of militants who made him a marked man. The Quilliam Foundation called ul-Qadri's fatwa one of the most comprehensive theological refutations of extremism. Ul-Qadri founded his Minhaj-ul-Quran movement in Pakistan in 1980 to promote inter-faith dialogue, tolerance and moderation. Fears that university-educated British Muslims were becoming radicalized motivated ul-Qadri to issue his 2010 fatwa.



Grand Mufti Mustafa Ceric

professor who lectures them. Case in point: Some reformist Muslims considered it a public relations failure when British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie was knighted. While they abhorred the infamous Iranian call to execute Rushdie for supposedly maligning the faith, his book's alleged sacrilege could rub even nonviolent traditional Muslims the wrong way.

Whenever the persuasive powers of so-called Islamic apostates and émigré intellectuals fall short, voices like Quilliam's, Ceric's and ul-Qadri's grow in importance. Few can argue the latest anti-terrorism clerics and laypersons aren't traditionalists. For all his "progressive" credentials, Ceric is visibly conservative. He is rarely seen without the robe and hat of a grand mufti, a senior religious leader in Sunni Islam. His wife wears a hijab, the traditional Islamic head scarf. On matters of morals he remains conventional, including adherence to the Islamic injunction to spread the faith among "unbelievers."

The organizers of the Quilliam Foundation also balance their renunciation of violence with a desire to create a "native" British Islam, one free of the Old World



REUTERS

Muslim men and women rally against terrorism in Ahmedabad, India, shortly after terrorists attacked Mumbai in 2008 and left nearly 200 dead.

“They can’t claim that their suicide bombings are martyrdom operations and that they become the heroes of the Muslim Umma [Muslim community]. No. They become heroes of hellfire, and they are leading towards hellfire,” he said at the release of the fatwa in March. “There is no place for any martyrdom, and their act is never, ever to be considered jihad.”

Gülen:

He insists that Shariah, or Islamic law, is a matter of personal morals, not state coercion. For all his millions of supporters, he has made enemies on both sides of the political spectrum. Some Islamists criticize his ties to the Turkish military and his outreach to non-Muslim leaders such as Pope John Paul II. Some secularists, including military officers who have been the protectors of secularism since Turkish President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

disbanded the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, fear he wants to impose an Islamic Republic on the country. In his schools, some in former Turkic-speaking Soviet republics, Gülen preaches a form of “Enlightenment Islam” in which panic about modernity has no place. His argument is simply drawn: Terrorists are monsters who stain Islam. As he said on his website in 2009: “Bin Laden is among the persons in this world that I hate most. Because he has defaced the beautiful face of Islam. He has produced a dirty image. Even if we work on repairing the terrible damage he has caused with all our power, it will take years. We shall speak on every platform everywhere. We shall write books. We shall declare ‘This is not Islam.’” □

Key sources for this story include the Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri fatwa, the Quilliam Foundation, the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* and the Fethullah Gülen’s official website.