

Death for Apostasy
By: Andrew G. Bostom
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Why Afghanistan's leading clerics endorse Abdul Rahman's execution.

Abdul Rahman faced death at the hands of our Afghan allies for the "crime" of converting to Christianity. This fate is no fluke, not a brutal Afghan variant on the practice of "tolerant" Islam. **Death for apostasy is part and parcel of Islamic scripture and tradition.** When Afghanistan's leading clerics endorse his death, they are on solid ground. Thus, in the wake of [appeals](#) by world leaders, including the [Pope](#), even though Mr. Rahman appears to have received a "[dispensation](#)" by the Karzai Government—for "mental health", or other reasons, unfortunately, he is and remains guilty as per [Afghan religious leaders, and Shari'a](#).

John Ralph Willis, Princeton University Professor of Near Eastern Studies, [has described the "apparent paradox" that jihad wars and razzias \(p.343\)](#)—rationalized as struggles to *liberate men from unbelief*—became, through the mass enslavement intrinsic to these campaigns, "a device to deprive men of freedom". And freedom, in the Muslim conception, "[being perfect slavery](#)" to Allah, the sole (distant) hope of earthly freedom from the bondage and humiliation of slavery for the subjugated infidel—whose dignity and very legal essence were annihilated by jihad—was to "...incarcerate his spirit in Islam", and await manumission at the discretion of his Muslim overlord. Another respected Princeton scholar of Islam, Patricia Crone, has stated bluntly (or one might argue, self-evidently) regarding such [jihad enslavement](#)—a major historical modality for Islamization—".. it would be *absurd to deny* that force played a major role in their [the vanquished infidels] conversion [to Islam]"

A strikingly similar "paradox" of Islam is the contention epitomized by Koran 2:256, "There is no compulsion in religion". The [poignant ongoing travails](#) of Afghan Muslim convert to Christianity Abdul Rahman, [who is willing to die for this basic expression of freedom of conscience](#), illustrate another uniquely Islamic fusion of absurdity and denial: in light of Koran 2:256 and repeated claims that Islam is characterized by freedom of belief and creed, devoid of compulsion, why has apostasy from Islam always been punished so harshly, for thirteen centuries, into the present era? Ibn Warraq's seminal 2003 study of apostasy, [Leaving Islam \(p.31\)](#), distinguishes transient doubt—edified by discovering the "truth" of Islam—from apostasy:

Doubt is a very good passageway, but a very bad place to stop in. However, apostasy is a matter of treason and ideological treachery, which originates from hostility and hypocrisy. The destiny of a person who has an inborn handicap is different from the destiny of one whose hand should be cut off due to the development of a dangerous and infectious disease. The apostasy of a Muslim individual whose parents have also been Muslim is a very infectious, dangerous and incurable disease that appears in the body of an ummah (people) and threatens peoples lives, and that is why this rotten limb should be severed.

And punishment by death for apostasy from Islam is firmly rooted in the most holy Muslim texts—both the Koran, and the hadith—as well as the sacred Islamic Law (the Shari'a).

Koran 4:89 states*:

They desire that you should disbelieve as they have disbelieved, so that you might be (all) alike; therefore take not from among them friends until they fly (their homes) in Allah's way; **but if they turn back, then seize them and kill them wherever you find them,** and take not from among them a friend or a helper.

One of the most authoritative Koranic commentators, Baydawi (d. 1315/16) interprets this passage thus: "Whosoever turns back from belief (irtada), openly or secretly, take him and kill him wheresoever ye find him, like any other infidel. Separate yourself from him altogether. Do not accept intercession in his regard" (cited in Zwemer, *The Law of Apostasy in Islam*, 1924, pp. 33-34). [Ibn Kathir's \(d. 1373\) venerated commentary on Koran](#)

4:89 concurs, maintaining that as the unbelievers have manifested their unbelief, they should be punished by death. These draconian judgments are reiterated in a number of hadith (i.e., collections of the putative words and deeds of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, as compiled by pious transmitters).

For example, Muhammad is reported to have said "Kill him who changes his religion" in hadith collections of both Bukhari and Abu Dawud. There is also a consensus by all four schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence (i.e., Maliki, Hanbali, Hanafi, and Shafi'i), as well as Shi'ite jurists, that apostates from Islam must be put to death.

Averroes (d. 1198), the renowned philosopher and scholar of the natural sciences, who was also an important Maliki jurist, [provided this typical Muslim legal opinion on the punishment for apostasy \(vol. 2, p. 552\):](#)

An apostate...is to be executed by agreement in the case of a man, because of the words of the Prophet, "Slay those who change their din [religion]"...Asking the apostate to repent was stipulated as a condition...prior to his execution

The contemporary (i.e., 1991) Al-Azhar (Cairo) Islamic Research Academy-endorsed Shafi'i manual of Islamic Law, ['Umdat al-Salik \(pp. 595-96\)](#) states:

Leaving Islam is the ugliest form of unbelief (kufr) and the worst...When a person who has reached puberty and is sane voluntarily apostasizes from Islam, he deserves to be killed. In such a case, it is obligatory...to ask him to repent and return to Islam. If he does it is accepted from him, but if he refuses, he is immediately killed.

Finally, [Warraq \(p.19\)](#) summarizes **the means by which convicted apostates have been killed, typically by the sword (i.e., beheading)**

...though there are examples of apostates tortured to death, or strangled, burned, drowned, impaled, or flayed. The Caliph 'Umar [d. 644] used to tie them to a post and had lances thrust into their hearts, and the [Mameluke] Sultan Baybars II (1308-09) made [their] torture legal.

Thus despite the apparent [dispensation](#) of Abdul Rahman's case, he most assuredly remains guilty according to the [Shari'a](#). As such, once released from [prison, if he survives the incarceration](#), should any pious Afghan Muslim kill him ([heeding the calls of local Afghan clerics](#)), according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, (which prevails in Afghanistan), specifically the important legal text *The Hidayah* by al-Marghiniani (d. 1197), "If any person kills an apostate....Nothing [i.e., no punishment]...is incurred by the slayer". At this stage, perhaps the only way to assure that Mr. Rahman avoids a tragic and gruesome fate ("[We will call on the people to pull him into pieces so there's nothing left](#)"), maintained Abdul Raouf a "moderate" cleric jailed for his previous opposition to the Taliban), is to find sanctuary for him outside of Afghanistan.

For a decade, three courageous, prescient scholars—[Ibn Warraq](#), [David Littman](#), and [Bat Ye'or](#)—have warned about the grave dangers posed by Shari'a-based "human rights" constructs, such as the 1990 Cairo Declaration (i.e., the so-called Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, to which all member states [now 57] of the Organization of the Islamic Conference—including "secular" Turkey—are signatories). Indeed the intrepid Senegalese jurist Adama Dieng (a Muslim, who subsequently became a United Nations special rapporteur), then serving as secretary-general to the International Commission of Jurists, [declared forthrightly in February 1992](#) that the Cairo Declaration, under the rubric of the Shari'a,

...gravely threatens the inter-cultural consensus on which the international human rights instruments are based; introduces, in the name of the defense of human rights, an intolerable discrimination against both non-Muslims and women; reveals a deliberately restrictive character in regard to certain fundamental rights and freedoms, to the point that certain essential provisions are below the legal standard in effect in a number of Muslim countries; [and] confirms the legitimacy of practices, such as corporal punishment, that attack the integrity and dignity of the human being.

And distracting, fatuous conceptions such as "[Extreme Shari'a](#)", are mere enervating delusions which do nothing to combat this growing, lethal threat to the most fundamental rights of free societies. Invoking the requisite lessons learned from Cold War experiences, [David Littman stated with the requisite moral clarity](#) that

...only a firm and uncompromising stand on the most fundamental questions can bring about the effective implementation of the ideals set forth in the International Bill of Human Rights. Diplomatically correct words and gestures are not enough

More than 80 years ago, in his 1924 *The Law of Apostasy in Islam*, Samuel Zwemer made these observations, still depressingly relevant today, and extending beyond the "Near East", to the entire Muslim world:

The story is told that Damocles, at the court of Dionysius of Sicily, pronounced the latter the happiest man on earth. When, however, Damocles was permitted to sit on the royal throne, he perceived a sword hanging by a horse-hair over his head. The imagined felicity vanished, and he begged Dionysius to remove him from his seat of peril. Today [circa 1924] we read of new mandates, of liberty, and of promised equality to minorities under Moslem rule; and newspapers assert that a new era has come to the Near East. Economic development, intellectual awakening, reforms, constitutions, parliaments and promises ***Does the sword of Damocles, however, still hang over the head of each convert from Islam to Christianity?*** Is the new Islam more tolerant than the old? Will the lives and property of converts be protected, and the rights of minorities be respected?

Again and again has European pressure, aided by a few educated Orientals, endeavored to secure equality before the law for all religions and races in the Near East. But as often as the attempt was made it proved a failure, each new failure more ghastly than the last. The reason is that the conscience and the faith of the most sincere and upright Moslems are bound up with the Koran and the Traditions. Civilization cannot eradicate deep-seated convictions. Rifles and ironclads, the cafe, the theatre, written constitutions, representative parliaments; and none of these reach far below the surface. A truer freedom...than the one supplied by their own faith, must come before Moslems can enter into the larger liberty which we enjoy.

Denial or obfuscation of the role played by the very essence of Islam—by Shari'a—will never remove this murderous scimitar of Damocles hanging over the heads of hapless "apostates" such as Abdul Rahman, [and others](#), perhaps [untold thousands, if not more, like him, throughout the Muslim world](#). And burgeoning, often irredentist Muslim populations in the West, [especially Western Europe](#), have established de facto Islamic colonies within their host countries, punctuated by demands for local jurisdiction under Shari'a Law. Should nothing be done to desecralize the Shari'a and divorce it entirely from the governance of civil societies, future Western generations, may face the same brutal application of "Shari'a" punishments for "apostasy", or as the Danish cartoon jihad demonstrated, [for "blaspheming" the Muslim prophet Muhammad](#). If that frightening scenario unfolds, Westerners may be forced to experience Mr. Rahman's current dire predicament—to paraphrase (albeit inelegantly) John Donne: "Do not ask over whom the scimitar hangs, it hangs over thee".

*For three simultaneous translations of Koran 4:89, [click here](#):

YUSUFALI: They but wish that ye should **reject Faith**, as they do, and thus be on the same footing (as they): But take not friends from them until they flee in the way of Allah (From what is forbidden). **But if they turn renegades, seize them and slay them wherever ye find them;** and (in any case) take no friends or helpers from their ranks;-

PICKTHAL: They long that ye should disbelieve even as they disbelieve, that ye may be upon a level (with them). So choose not friends from them till they forsake their homes in the way of Allah; if they turn back (to enmity) then take them and kill them wherever ye find them, and choose no friend nor helper from among them,

SHAKIR: They desire that you should disbelieve as they have disbelieved, so that you might be (all) alike; therefore take not from among them friends until they fly (their homes) in Allah's way; but if they turn back, then seize them and kill them wherever you find them, and take not from among them a friend or a helper.

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