Today's sermon is in memory of Samir Khan, who along with Anwar al-Awlaki was killed in Yemen by the U.S. forces in a drone attack on September 30, 2011, allegedly for being a terrorist. Samir was personally known to me since the time he was a sweet, bright, and promising kid of eleven. He was a US citizen, born in Saudi Arabia and raised in America.

Samir's story is the story of a devout Muslim who despite peer pressure chose to be faithful to his religion. He was the epitome of a proud Muslim youth bubbling with energy, but disgruntled with the evil, injustice, and hypocrisy prevailing in the society. The energy of the youth if not directed properly often finds its way into destructive channels. One of these paths is that of extremism and militancy.

Samir's father, a close acquaintance of mine, and a committed Muslim, possessing a balanced approach and congenial disposition, tried his utmost to convince his son to follow the path of moderation rather than that of extremism but to no avail. In the hope that Samir could still be pulled away from the attitude of militancy that was growing in him, his father sent him to me and to other imams and scholars. I tried my level best to persuade him by trying to make him see that the ideology of violence and extremism which was budding in him was not the right course to follow. After his unbending stand not to renounce his extremist views, I was forced to terminate his membership from IONA in January of 2007, because IONA is a non-violent movement whose aim is to promote and struggle for the establishment of justice. Samir left USA in 2009 and went to Yemen where he met his fate.

Anwar al-Awlaki was born in America and used to be the Imam of Dar al-Hijrah mosque in Virginia. His views that used to be moderate at one time began to take a turn towards extremism after he was subjected to scrutiny by law-enforcement agencies after the 9/11 tragedy.

Terrorism is a complex phenomenon that is rooted in occurrences and experiences that lead people, especially the youth to become unduly aggressive in the support of a cause. Soon after 9/11, President George W. Bush declared war on Afghanistan, a country that had nothing to do with the events leading to 9/11, on the ground that Osama Bin Laden had found sanctuary in that country. Then came the passing of the USA PATRIOT Act on October 26, 2001 that dramatically reduced restrictions on law enforcement agencies' ability to search telephone, e-mail communications, medical, financial, and other records of whomsoever they wanted. Apparently, it was the Muslims who became the target of this Act worldwide. I myself have not been spared from investigation, interrogation, and humiliation at airports, security check posts, and other places. This has become the norm and continues up to this day. It is unfortunate that practicing Muslims are viewed as potential terrorists.

In 2003, without the consent of United Nations, the USA allying itself with Britain waged an illegal war on Iraq, a sovereign country, and while hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian lives including those of women and children were lost as a result of this unwarranted war, and while millions of Iraqis were displaced, America bragged about the ‘shock and awe’ that it had struck on its enemy. The pretext of launching aggression against Iraq in order to divert it of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) turned out to be a big lie after all, as no weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq till this day. On the contrary the use of unconventional lethal weapons against the innocent people of Iraq and Afghanistan has left a trail of death and destruction, not to speak of birth defects in children and higher incidences of cancer.

The horrific scenes of human corpses and ruins brought about by the war in and around the cities and villages of Iraq and Afghanistan coupled with the graphic images of the most inhuman torture techniques used against Iraqi prisoners of war at the infamous Abu Ghuraib Prison and of other suspects at the Guantanamo Detention Camp at the hands of those who claim to be the ‘most civilized’ and the ‘champion of human rights’ added fuel to fire. The already disillusioned Muslim youth, especially those who became a prey to the rhetoric and indoctrination of extremists got entrapped into seeing that retaliation, even if it involved violent means was the only way to redress the situation. Samir Khan was one of such many youth around the world.
While the American taxpayers’ money was being siphoned to fund these wars, we were almost on the brink of opening another front with Iran. As if all this was not enough, there was the US supported Israeli aggression of Lebanon in 2006 followed by the US turning a blind eye to the Israeli massacre of innocent civilians in Gaza. And all along, the unending construction of Israeli settlements on occupied lands continues till this day. How can such oppression and injustice be taken lying down without lifting a finger in protest?

The Prophet (SAW) described the ummah as one body, and said, “The similitude of believers in regard to mutual love, affection, and fellow-feeling is that of one body; when any limb of it aches, the whole body aches, because of sleeplessness and fever.” So if a Muslim anywhere in the world is hurt, and that too as a result of oppression and injustice, another Muslim is bound to feel the pain of that hurt and suffering.

Here at home, the youth learn that those in the higher echelons in the banking industry rather than being punished for committing gross financial irregularities and bringing about the biggest recession of the century are being awarded with large sums of money. Movies such as ‘Confessions of an Economic Hit Man’ and ‘The Corporation’ go to depict the inside story of the grim financial crisis that has gripped us all. The youth have begun to realize that our country is not ruled by the collective will of its people but by a few corporations and conglomerates who in association with the World Bank and the IMF happen to be at the forefront in triggering and widening the gap between the have and the have not’s. The action of our own government has been a significant factor in the rise of the ideology of militancy in our youth. Samir Khan was a victim of such ideology.

Then there is the conniving strategy of political hypocrisy. Why didn’t the American Democracy challenge the tyrant, oppressive, and dictatorial regimes of Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Gaddafi of Libya, Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, Bashar al-Assad of Syria, and others, while it toppled Saddam Hussein on the specious ground of establishing a ‘Democratic Government’ in Iraq? It was the youth of these countries who after groaning under the yoke of oppression and injustice began to overthrow their unjust leaders through non-violent methods of arousing peoples’ conscience through peaceful protests.

Terrorism is a global problem, and Islam must be the solution to this rising phenomenon. Let it be clear that Islam in no way approves the killing of innocent people and destroying of property. As a matter of fact, terrorism and extremism are absolutely forbidden in Islam. There is no provision to take recourse to extremism of any sort in the Shariah, in the Qur’an or in the Sunnah. The Prophet (SAW) said, “Beware that you go to extremes in religion and become an extremist. Those before you were destroyed because of their extremist views.”

It is the extremists who play with the emotions of our youth and instill in them a militant ideology that is poles apart from the genuine Islamic ethics, values, and teachings. Such negative indoctrination mainly takes place through the internet and other tools and equipments of modern technology. Parents should be watchful in this regard and prudently monitor their children’s conduct and behavior. They should encourage them at the same time to spend more time in faith study circles. Without being grounded in the Qur’an and the Sunnah, the youth can easily get ensnared by the militant ideology. The Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA) has recently held deliberations over these issues at Chicago and recommended ways to ensure that the energy of our youth is directed towards constructive channels rather than getting dissipated in harmful and injurious pursuits.

We have to engage our youth in a heart to heart conversation, especially when they are in their adolescence, and try to make them understand that there is an alternative to give vent to one’s genuine anger and anxiety, and that is none other than the Prophetic way. The Prophet (SAW) said, “He who amongst you sees something evil should modify it with the help of his hand; and if he has not strength enough to do it, then he should do it with his tongue, and if he has not strength enough to do it, (even) then he should abhor it from his heart, and that is the least of faith.” As Muslims, we are part and parcel of this global village and we are responsible to change the world for the better. This ummah was declared as the best nation for two reasons: holding true beliefs, and practicing al-amr bi al-ma’ruf wa al-nahy ‘an al-munkar. “You are the best of the nations raised up for (the benefit of) men; you enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong and believe in Allah.” (Aal ‘Imran, 3: 110). The Prophetic way is to bring about a change in a peaceful, non-violent way. A real Muslim is not one who lives in isolation and cares about himself only, but is one who endures the difficulties of living in an immoral society and tries his best to do something to change what he can change.

Last but not least, we join all those people of conscience who have publicly condemned the assassinations of Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, both U.S. citizens, in violation of the 5th amendment according to which no one shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law. IONA issued a press release condemning this action of the US Government on the very day the news of the assassination was made public.

We pray for the departed souls and the bereaved families. We also pray for peace and justice to prevail.

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