

ISLAM AND THE CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE OF EXTREMISM

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ABSTRACT

Extremism as precursor to terrorism and in certain cases even as the root cause of terrorism and socio-political violence is a mainstay nowadays among scholars, policymakers and journalists alike. It has become the master signifier of the late 'war on terror' and provided a new lens through which to view Muslims and Islam. Various circles opposed to Islam are playing the most effective role in planting this fear into people's minds and virtually led to a cottage industry of Islamophobia.

In recent times, the subsequent horrendous killings and serial bomb explosions in major metropolitan cities around the world have further led to a burgeoning interest in this phenomenon in the academic arena as well.

What Islam and the Holy texts itself says about this discourse of extremism, in this article, a sincere effort will be put forward to answer all the related questions.

KEYWORDS: Islam, Extremism, Al-Ifrāt, Al-Tafrīt, Al-Wasāṭiyyah, Moderation

INTRODUCTION

Since the last decades of 20th century, the ideology of extremism emerged as a big threat to the world peace. At the beginning, it appeared in the forms of fanaticism, dogmatism, and sectarianism etc but gradually these fanatical and sectarian elements adopted the violent means to spread their ideology.

After 9/11 this extremist and terror ideology encompassed the whole world and the threat of terror attacks grew day by day. Though USA and its alliances launched the so called 'War on Terror', a mass destruction against terror organizations, but this initiative could not meet the expectations. Instead of destroying terrorist networks, it turned itself terror for civilians and innocent Muslims. More than four million innocents were killed till the date as a result of war on terror and majority of the victims were Muslims.¹ Ahmad points out in his article that the majority of those killed in these wars and those suffering most from these wars are Muslims—a stark contrast to the common stereotypes which allege Islam and Muslims to be the deadliest group and ideology in the world killing innocents.²

The media and other vested interest groups, with backing from the West started blaming Islam and the Holy Quran for this ideology of killing and led the rising wave of fear of Islam in the world. This wave is consolidated more by the terror attacks carried out across the world in the name of Islam and the self-styled interpretations of Islam and out of context use of Islamic teachings by some extremist scholars and armed groups.

The recent new deadliest group of ISIS and serial bomb explosions in major metropolitan cities around the world

1 "Do the Math, Global War on Terror has killed 4 Million Muslims or More", *MintPress New Desk*.2015. Accessed: April 5, 2016. <http://www.mintpressnews.com/do-the-math-global-war-on-terror-has-killed-4-million-muslims-or-more-208225/>

2 Ibid.

have further led to a burgeoning interest in this phenomenon in the academic arena as well. Many articles, books and reports have been published on the topic; some linking terrorism with Islam and others relating it with socio economic and political deprivation. Many renowned Muslim scholars also penned down some well versed articles and books against extremism and terrorism condemning these killings and declared these coward attacks as violative of core teachings of Islam. Many internationally known Muslim religious institutions such as Jamia Azhar, Dārul Uloom Deoband, and *fatwā* councils also wrote some well established theological articles and books on the topic, issued *fatwās* against as an attempt to remove the false allegations against Islam and common Muslims and organized interfaith dialogue programs to combat the epidemic of extremism and Islamophobia. Thus many initiatives were taken to fight this ghastly disaster and to overcome the challenge which is growing day by day.

In this article, I will study the phenomenon of extremism on the theological basis. After defining the extremism, I will identify the causes responsible for this growing trend. I will also point out some of manifestations of extremism and religious fanaticism. At the end, I will conclude with some suggestions which may prove helpful to fight this challenge and would benefit in this regard.

The Contemporary Discourse of Extremism

We can find from the very early history of Islam, when Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) started his holy mission of calling people towards the divine message and how he and his companions were treated by the extremist forces of Makkah. From killing Ḥaḍrat Summaya (may Allah be pleased with her), the mother of Ḥaḍrat ‘Ammār bin Yāsir (may Allah be pleased with him), punishing socially weak Muslims on daily routine by their masters and elites, the physical and mental torture of the Prophet, to three years long siege of Muslims in *Sh‘ab Abī Ṭālib*, and then forcing destitute Muslims and the Prophet to leave Makkah, they tried all kinds of tyranny and torture to suppress these defenseless Muslims. Those extremists were such obsessed that they even could not differentiate between women, insolvent, old and children. They carried out all this brutality and oppression just because Muslims wanted freedom to practice the religion of their choice, a religion which ensures them success of this world and the hereafter.

As such, when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was accepted as the only supreme power in all matters of Madīnah, the first initiative he took was to create the environment of equality and justice. He was well aware about the consequences of extremism and hatred. He called all tribes of Madīnah to sign an accord (*Mithāq-al-Madīnah*; the first written accord in the history of human civilization) to ensure the safety and prosperity of every person living there.³ The Prophet tried all to provide every person, irrespective of his creed and religion, his basic rights. He spread the word of truth, justice, equality, forgiveness and moderation to everywhere and created the peaceful atmosphere in Madīnah. He never let any culprit to adopt the extremist views and destroy the peaceful environment.

It was the impact of his moderate and balanced divine teachings that, in a very short time, Islam transcended the most of the major world ideologies and civilizations and thus became the face of prosperous and civilized world.

So it was not even imagined that a religion like Islam which itself means peace would be alleged to promote any kind of harshness, rigidity, hatred and extremism among its followers. Though we do find in the history of Islam some groups like *Khārijītes*, *Bātinītes* and *Krāmītīs* etc who adopted violent means to fulfill their desires and for that they also literally approached the holy texts to justify their actions but they were rejected by the mass and very soon they met with

³ Thaḳīb Akbar, *Islam awr Intihāpasandī*, (Islamabad: Islami Nazriyati Council, 2009), 8.

their fate and vanished.

But very recently, this trend of violent ideology emerged again and it mainly targeted Muslim society. We experience daily in news papers and on social media how Islam and Muslims have become easy target of any terror allegation. Whenever there is any terror attack, world media quickly and very judgmentally link that attack with Islam and Muslims. Unfortunately, some of our own miss guided people who have adopted extremist and violent means also provide opportunity to the bias media and think tanks to consolidate these allegations. These extremist Muslims assume that they are benefiting Islam but they are actually damaging and defaming Islam.

What is Extremism

In Arabic texts, there are two terms which are popularly used to define the phenomenon of extremism in Islam; *al-ifrāt* and *al-tafrīt*. Though many other words such as *al-tatarruf* (radicalism), *al-tashaddud* (exceedingly restrictive, rigorism), *al-jafa'* (aversion), *al-unuf* (aggression), *al-juhud* (rejection), *al-tahāwun* (becoming low), and *al-takāsul* (laziness) etc have also been used to describe the meaning but the above mentioned two terms are most popular terms found in the religious texts. And here we will also use these two terms to define extremism.

***Al-Ifrāt* (Excessiveness):** The first word, *al-ifrāt*⁴, is derived from the word *al-furṭah* which means 'extreme and beyond the actual limits' and *al-ifrāt* is described in the dictionaries as to exceed the boundaries and go beyond the actualities. The definition has been supported by Ibn al-Fāris and al-Jawharī.⁵

The Prophet's wife Umm Salmah (may Allah be pleased with her) has narrated as communicating to 'Ā'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her), another wife of the Prophet (peace be upon him) that "The Prophet prohibited you from immoderation (*al-furṭah*)."⁶ In another narration, it is reported that "The Prophet prohibited you from immoderation in religion (*al-furṭah fi al-dīn*),"⁷ implying advancement, antecedence and exceeding the limits. Explaining the verse of the Holy Quran, "They (Moses and Aaron) replied, our Lord, we fear lest he commit some excess against us, or exceed, all bounds in persecuting us"⁸, al-Ṭabarī refers the term, *al-ifrāt*, to extravagance, immoderation and exceeding the proper bound.⁹ From the above accounts, it is explicit that *al-ifrāt* means exceeding the bound and driving away from the required measure, which is the opposite of *al-tafrīt*. Scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyya, have used another Arabic word, *al-ghulluw*, along with *al-ifrāt* to describe the term.¹⁰ Scholars of Arabic language define it as transgressing the limits.¹¹ The verse 171 of *al-Nisā*: (*lā taghlū fi dīnikum*) means 'exceed not the limits in your religion.'¹² Many other verses in the Qur'an also bear this term as well as the Prophetic literature. The *hadith*, (*Iyyākum wa al-ghuluwwa fi al-dīn*)¹³ 'save yourselves from excess in the religion', admonishes people from becoming extremists in religious matters.

Ibn Taymiyya defines the term as "to go beyond the limits in dealing with things, for instance, to overstep the

4 Other terms to describe the meaning are *al-tatarruf* (radicalism), *al-tashaddud* (exceedingly restrictive, rigorism), and *al-unuf* (aggression).

5 *Mu'jam Maqāyīs al-Lughah*, s.v. "Farāṭ."

6 *Lisān al-Arab*, s.v. "Farāṭ."

7 Ibid.

8 Ṭāhā, 20: 45.

9 Abū J'afar Ṭabarī, *Jām'i al-Bayān fi Tawīl al-Qur'ān*, eds. Aḥmad Moḥammad Shākir (Riyāḍ: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 2000), 16: 170.

10 Aḥmad bin 'Abdul Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyyah, *Iqtizā al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*, eds. Abdul Razzaq Malihabadi, (Riyad: Dar al-Salam Publishers and Distributors, 1997), 100.

11 *Lisān al-Arab*, s.v. "Ghalā".

12 *Al-Nisa*, 4: 171.

13 Aḥmad ibn Shu'aib al-Nasai, *Sunan al-Nasai*, edis. 'Abdul Fattah Abul al-Ghuddah, 2nd ed. (Ḥalab: Maktab al Maṭbū'at al-Islāmiyah, 1986), 5: 268, [3057].

reality in appreciating or criticizing someone and like that in other matters.”¹⁴

There are numerous other Qur’anic verses and the Prophetic Traditions against ‘al-ifrāt’ (excessiveness) and ‘ghuluww’ (exaggeration) and their bad effects which will be discussed in detail appropriately through the paper.

So, *al-ifrāt* and *al-ghuluww* in Islamic *Sharī‘ah* (law) refers to crossing the scope and boundaries set by Islam while following the instructions of Islam or to exaggerate in such a manner that it will lack the supreme goal or aim of Islam (*al-Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah*). There is a particular goal and objective behind every exercise of Islam, which often loses by holding such behavior of exaggeration and excessiveness.

Al-Tafrīt (Negligence): *Al-tafrīt*¹⁵ means ‘to fail to do what ought to be done’ and ‘to lessen things from their reality’. Ḥaḍrat Alī says: “An ignorant person is not seen except an excessive (*mufrit*) or prodigal and spendthrift (*mufarrit*).”¹⁶ It is lessening prodigality in man’s action and intensifying neglectfulness in anything. The term *al-tafrīt* is found in holy texts also.

Allah almighty says: “until when the hour comes upon them suddenly, they will say: O our grief for our neglecting it!”¹⁷ Al-Tabari in the explanation of the verse 38 of *al-An‘ām*, “We have not neglected anything in the Book”¹⁸, has quoted Ibn Abbās as “we did not leave anything but recorded that in the *Umm al-Kitāb* (the book of deeds). It implies that everything has been penned in our record of deeds and nothing has been missed.¹⁹

There is also a *ḥadīth*, “Indeed, There is no negligence (*tafrīt*) in sleeping...”²⁰

Scholars have explained the word *tafrīt* in the *ḥadīth* as ‘to neglect’ and ‘to give up’.

Ibn ‘Abbās, Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr, Mujāhid and the commentators like al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurtubī and al-Qāsimī all hold the similar views that the term *tafrīt* refers to leaving, scorning, neglecting, limiting, shortening, confining, omitting and forfeiting.

Here, it is worthy to say that both *ifrāt* (excessiveness) and *tafrīt* (negligence) are two disliked poles of extremism and are against the spirit of Islam. Islam in contrary recommends moderation and balance in everything: in belief, worship, conduct and legislation. Moderation and balance is not only, a general characteristic of Islam, rather it is a fundamental landmark. The Quran identifies the Muslim *ummah* as *ummah wasat*, the moderate and balanced nation.

We find numerous Quranic verses and *hadiths* calling upon Muslims to be moderate in every sphere of life and avoid and reject all kinds of extremism, rigidity and excessiveness. As in the above mentioned traditions as in several others, The Prophet emphatically warns against extremism and instructs to observe moderation.

After reaching *Muzdalifah*-during his last hajj-the Prophet (peace be upon him) requested Ibn ‘Abbas to gather some stones for him. Ibn ‘Abbas selected small stones. Upon seeing the stones, the Prophet (peace be upon him) approved

14 Ibn Taymiyyah, 100.

15 The other related terms are as *al-taqṣīr* (to shorten), *al-tazyī‘* (carelessness), *al-tahāwun* (becoming low), and *altakāsul* (laziness), and *al-jaḥā‘* (aversion).

16 *Lisan al-Arab*, v.s. “al-farat”.

17 *Al-An‘ām*, 6: 31.

18 *Al-An‘ām*, 6: 38.

19 *Al-Ṭabarī*, 7: 188.

20 Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjaj al-Qushairī al-Nīshāpurī, *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, edis. Muḥammad Fuwād ‘Abdul Bāqī (Beirut: Dar Ihyā al-Turās al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 1: 472, [681].

of their size and said: "Yes, with such [stones do stone Satan]. Beware of excessiveness in religion".²¹ This clearly indicates that Muslims should not be so zealous as to believe that using larger stones is better, thus gradually allowing excessiveness to creep into their lives. Dr Mūsā Mūsawī argues that this warning against excessiveness applies to all forms of belief, worship, and transaction.

Ḥaḍrat Jābir b. ‘Abdullāh narrates that we were sitting with the Prophet (peace be upon him) and he drew a line, then he drew two lines to its right and two to its left. Then the Prophet put his hand on the middle line (*al-khaṭ al-awsaṭ*) and said: "This the way of your lord". Then he recited the verse 153 of *al-An‘ām*: "This is My path - a straight one. You shall follow it, and do not follow any other paths, lest they divert you from His path."

The Prophet is also reported to have said: "Ruined were those who indulged in hair-splitting details."

All the above mentioned references and other accounts clearly resist any tendency towards extremism and rebuke those who exceed the limits of moderation affirmed by Islam.

Manifestations of Extremism

Extremism has many manifestations and indications. Extremist elements try every possible way to affect the society and make common man believe in their ideology. Some of the common manifestations are presented under here.

Bigotry: The first common manifestation any extremist mind has is bigotry which hardly allows a person to think about human interests, objectives of *Shar‘iah* and the context of the situation. Such a person does not listen to others so that he may find most sound view to follow. Instead he expects others to follow him. He assumes that only he is on the right way and anybody who has different view is impious (*fāsiq*), innovator (*mubtad‘i*) or even infidel (*kāfir*). Such intellectual terrorism is as horrifying as physical terrorism and it directly violets the very basic right of human dignity.

Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him) narrates that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: A Muslim is the brother of a Muslim. He neither oppresses him nor humiliates him nor looks down upon him. All things of a Muslim are inviolable for another Muslim: his blood, his property and his honor. Piety is here - and he pointed to his chest three times. It is evil enough for a Muslim to hold his brother Muslim in contempt."

Perpetual Commitment to Excessiveness and Exaggeration

Another indication of extremism is a perpetual commitment to excessiveness and exaggeration in the observance of more difficult choices in the religion. This kind of people strongly recommends others to do likewise despite the fact that Allah has not ordained it. A person, if he so wishes, may choose individually a hard-line opinion in some matters and on certain occasions but it is not allowed to compel others follow him in this way even it is discouraged to choose difficulties as a regular. The Holy Quran in this regards clears: "Allah desires ease for you and He desires not hardship for you...".

While interpreting the above verse, Al-Qasimī quotes al-Sh‘abī remarking "when there are differences of opinion between two things, the easiest and the nearest of the two is the right thing and should be upheld."

The Prophet (peace be upon him) in the *ḥadīth* "Indeed the best religion is the easiest one, indeed the best religion

²¹ Muḥammad ibn Yazīd Ibn Mājāh, *Sunan Ibn Mājāh*, edis. Muḥammad Fuwād ‘Abdul BāPdRPr="000A0EAF">

is the easiest one” repeatedly emphasizes the ease in the religion.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have adopted ease or flexibility as a method in his life. An example of such a practice is highlighted in a *ḥadīth* which states: “Narrated Ā’ishah (may Allah be pleased with her): Whenever the Prophet was given an option between two things, he used to choose the easiest one as long as it was not sinful; but if it was sinful, he would remain far from it.”

The Prophet (peace be upon him) had warned Muslims not to be extremists in their religion. One such example is: Narrated Abū Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him): The Prophet said, “Religion is very easy and whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue in that way. So, you should not be extremists, but try to be near to perfection and receive the good things that you will be rewarded and gain strength by worshipping in the mornings, afternoons and during the last hours of the nights.

Suspicious and Judgmental Behavior

An extremist readily accuses people and quickly passes judgments. He considers a person sinner the moment he suspects him of something contrary to the spirit and teachings of Islam which encourages a Muslim to think well of his fellow brothers and help them to improve their words and deeds. The Holy Quran guides: “O believers, avoid indulgence in suspicion, for surely suspicion in certain cases is sinful, and spy not (on one another)...”.

The *ḥadīth* also depicts: “thinking well of others partakes in service to God.”

In another *ḥadīth* The Prophet has warned the believers to “beware of suspicion, for suspicion can be tantamount to the worst form of speech.”

But an extremist puts dignity of a person who disagrees with him into question and defames him in public. For example: if a person argues that carrying a stick or drinking while sitting on the ground is not a proper *Sunnah*, though his view is based on solid evidences, he will be accused of disrespect with the Prophet himself. The desire to criticize others and justify oneself is a destructive tendency and the Holy Quran warns saying:

“Therefore, justify not yourselves; He knows well who it is that guards against evil.”

Marginal Issues at the Expense of Major Ones

Extremism also manifests in an intense interest in marginal issues at the expense of major ones-those which could affect the existence, identity, and destiny of the whole *ummah*. There is excessive and unnecessary talk about growing a beard, wearing clothes below the ankle, acquisition of photographs and so on. Unfortunately, such time-wasting arguments persist and occupy our thinking at a time when we are being confronted by the unrelenting hostility, Islamophobia and infiltration of secularism, communism, Zionism, and racism etc, as well as terrorist and other deviationist groups in the Muslim world.

It is a pity that those who initiate and encourage these confrontations are well known for their negligence of essential religious duties (*ḥuqūq Allah* and *ḥuqūq al-ibād*), i.e., the investigation of what is permissible and what is forbidden, kindness to others, respect for the rights of their spouse, children, and neighbors and execution of their own tasks. However, instead of improving themselves, they derive great pleasure from initiating conflicts which eventually lead them to take either a hostile or a hypocritical position.

Such wrangling is the subject of the following *hadith*: "People going astray after guidance are bound to be argument-stricken."

The Anathema of *Takfīr*: Extremism reaches its utmost stage when they sanction taking the lives of opponents, looting their property and refusing to abide any covenant concluded with them. They brand anyone infidel whosoever doesn't accept their ideology and sometimes even those who do accept but do not join their group are declared apostates and who must be deprived from the rights available for a Muslim, he will not be considered a part of the Muslim society anymore and thus will be denied from Islamic burial, must not be buried in Muslim graveyard etc and even may be killed with impunity.

Sectarian Nexus: One of the important causes behind religious extremism is the radical sectarian associations. This epidemic has torn Muslim *ummah* into pieces. Where it creates hatred among Muslims it also presents a bad picture of Islam to others. Instead of practicing and propagating Islam, a religion for all, the extremists propagate their own sect and school of thought. They accuse each other of heresy, impiety, discord and sometimes of infidelity and apostasy. Sectarianism is as such one of the basic causes of extremism.

Causes of Extremism

Extremism does not originate haphazardly. It must indeed have causes and factors. It is also reality that no single cause is wholly responsible for driving extremism. It is a complex phenomenon which has various interrelated causes, some of them are direct, others indirect, some found in the distant past, others in the present. These causes may be religious, political, social, economic, psychological, intellectual, or a combination of all of these.

Scarcity of the true spirit of Islam

Coming to the religious causes behind extremism, scholars have observed that one of the main causes is lack of insight into the true spirit of Islam and less understanding of objectives and purposes of religion. It doesn't mean total ignorance but half knowledge of *Dīn* which makes such person to assume that he knows all there is to know but actually he has no more than hodgepodge undigested information which neither enhances insight nor clarifies vision. Such a person fails to understand the relationship between the parts which make the whole. He hardly knows the difference between different kinds of *Shariah* rulings and sometimes he makes supererogatory act as obligatory one and vice versa.

Alarming against this dangerous tendency, Imam al-Shatibi writes that this is the root cause of *bida* and disunity of the *ummah* and it could lead to internal division and gradual disintegration.

Literal Approach

People who cling to literal meaning of the texts in regulating acts of worship (*'ibādāt*) and transactions (*mu'āmalāt*) without looking into their purposes and human interests they are meant to serve often turn extremists. Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi holds that "In this matter my opinion as that of other Muslim scholars who have studied it carefully, is that Islamic acts of worship is to be accepted as they are without an attempt to analyze their bases and purposes whereas the bases and purposes of those rulings which apply to our mundane transactions can and should be analyzed." He illustrates his opinion with the examples that it is not permissible to claim that a person who gives his money to poor or finances valuable Islamic projects has been therefore exempted from the obligation of Hajj. In the same line, modern tax could not replace *Zakah* which is the third pillar of Islam and one which is on a par with the Prayer (*Ṣalah*). However in

relation to acts other than the purely devotional ones, we may examine them in light of their objectives. For example it is narrated in an authentic *ḥadīth* that a Muslim should not carry a copy of Quran when travelling in a land of unbelievers or through the enemy territory. If we examine the purpose behind this prohibition, we may conclude that it was out of this concern that enemies may do harm or defile the Book. In absence of such thing a Muslim can take it with him wherever wishes. This is the customary practice among all Muslims today.

But the literalists do not pay any attention towards the bases and purposes of any kind of ruling and as such reject *t'ālīl* (reasoning) totally. As such when they find disagreement from other scholars, they turn extremists in their opinion and hardly heed into the desired intent and inner meanings.

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion above clearly shows that religious extremism has been emerged as one of the biggest challenges the Muslim world is facing nowadays and as such concrete and long lasting measures be taken to confront the monsters of religious extremism and radicalism. As such unification and harmonization among different religious sects and schools of thought should be the first step in this regard. Religious scholars and institutions of every ideological school and sect should come together to combat this epidemic. They must preferably preach and teach their followers Islamic teachings of peace, tolerance, harmony and dispensation of fundamental rights to all those who does concern. They must not involve common Muslims in their ideological differences which they have with other school of thought or sect. They should encourage their followers to build good relations with their fellow Muslims and do not let ideological differences spoil their Muslims brotherhood.

Muslim scholars and clergy should utilize their institutions and platforms for the advancement of *wasāṭiyyah* in their respective regions and should facilitate project-based works, including high caliber research on well-identified issues, exchange of specialists and scholars through study visits, seminars, and interactive engagements and training mosque *imāms* and *khatībs* to promote the word of peace and harmony and avoid any sectarian view which might divide the *ummah*.

It is important for religious clergy and authorities to pursue mosque leaders (*imāms*) to make combating extremism and violence, an integral part of their teachings at Friday sermons and other occasions. Muslim masses listen to them, who are obviously influential yet have hardly taken advantage of their privileged position for the common good. The main thrust of Friday sermons still remains on worship matters, heaven and hell and on death and then resurrection etc and they hardly transcends to real community issues and challenges.

We should adopt an optimistic attitude while dealing with other fellow brothers by showing goodwill towards them and while discussing dissenting issues our scholars should also adopt the same method and must conduct patient intellectual dialogues with others in order to clarify conceptions, to clear up misunderstandings, and to identify similarities and differences.

The last recommendation in this line is that we should now stop harshness and accusing each other of un-belief and impiety and finding with whatever the people who do not agrees with us do. This will only alienate and separate us.

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