

## Islam and Violence

After the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the issue of violence and religion has once again come into intense discussions and debate. It is our conviction that although various political, socio-economic and cultural factors have significantly contributed to the rise of violence and terrorism in contemporary fundamentalist Islam, we cannot ignore the religious dimension of this violence that goes back to the very heart and origin of Islam.

The point that we'd like to make is quite simple. Muslims who commit acts of violence and terror in the name of God, can find ample justification for their actions, based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the sayings and examples from prophet Muhammad himself! We have often heard in the media that the relationship between Muslim terrorists and Islam is like that of KKK and Christianity. This analogy is absolutely false. Christians who have engaged in violence, are betraying the explicit teachings and examples of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, Muslims who take upon themselves to destroy their alleged enemies in the name of God, can rightly claim to be following the commands of God in the Qur'an and imitating their prophet as their role model.

Our point, of course, should not be taken to imply that all faithful and devout Muslims, must become violent, in order to be true to the teachings of Islam. We will not hesitate to say that the vast majority of the Muslim world condemns acts of terror and violence. There are many schools of thought in Islam with various and often conflicting interpretations of the Qur'an. However, the important distinction that we are making is this: the minority groups in Islam who resort to violence, are not an aberration to Islam, but in fact can legitimately claim to be working within the basic parameters of Islamic *Jihad*. We will now turn to the evidence in support of our claim.

The following are only some of the verses in the Qur'an that can and have been used in the history of Islam in support of violence in the name of God and the glories of martyrdom in a holy war.

2:190-193 "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you ... And slay them wherever ye catch them ... And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression and there prevail justice and faith in God ..."

2:216 "Fighting is prescribed for you and ye dislike it. But it is possible that ye dislike a thing which is good for you, and that ye love a thing which is bad for you. But God knoweth and ye know not."

2:224 "Then fight in the cause of God and know that God heareth and knoweth all things."

3:157-158 "And if ye are slain or die in the way of God, forgiveness and mercy from God are far better than all they could amass. And if ye die, or are slain, Lo! It is unto God that ye are brought together."

3:169 "Think not of those who are slain in God's way as dead. Nay, they live finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord."

3:195 "... Those who have ... fought or been slain, verily I will blot out from them their iniquities and admit them into Gardens with rivers flowing beneath; a reward from the presence of God ..."

4:101 "... For the Unbelievers are unto you open enemies."

4:74, 75 "Let those fight in the cause of God who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter. To him who fighteth in the cause of God whether he is slain or gets victory, soon shall we give him a reward of great (value). Those who believe fight in the cause of God and those who reject faith fight in the cause of evil, so fight ye against the friends of Satan, feeble indeed is the cunning of Satan."

4:89 "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 their ranks until they flee in the way of God. But if they turn renegades, seize them and slay them wherever ye find them..."

4:95 "Not equal are those believers who sit at (at home) and receive no hurt and those who strive and fight in the cause of God with their goods and their persons. God hath granted a grade higher to those who strive and fight with their goods and persons than those who sit (at home).

5:36 "The punishment of those who wage war against God and His apostle and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is: execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land. That is their disgrace in this world and a heavy punishment is theirs in the Hereafter."

5:54 "O ye who believe. Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors. They are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily God guideth not a people unjust."

8:12-17 "Remember thy Lord inspired the angels (with the message): "I am with you. Give firmness to the believers. I will instill terror into the hearts of the unbelievers. Smite ye above their necks and smite all their finger tips off them. This because they contend against God and his apostle. If any contend against God and his apostle, God is strict in punishment ... O ye who believe. When ye meet the unbelievers in hostile array, never turn your backs to them. If any do turn his back to them on such a day, unless it be a stratagem of war ... he draws on himself the wrath of God and his abode is Hell, an evil refuge (indeed)."

8:59-60 "Let not the unbelievers think that they can get the better (of the godly). They will never frustrate (them). Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror into (the hearts of) the enemies of God and your enemies and others besides, whom ye may not know, but whom God doth know ..."

8:65 "O apostle! Rouse the believers to the fight. If there are twenty amongst you, patient and persevering, they will vanquish two hundred. If a hundred they will vanquish a thousand of the unbelievers, for these are a people without understanding."

9:5 "... fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war) ..."

9:14 "Fight them, and God will punish them by your hands, cover them with shame ..."

9:29 "Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by God and his apostle nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth (even if they are) of the people of the Book, until they pay the *Jizya* [religious tax] with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued."

47:4 "Therefore, when ye meet the unbelievers, smite at their necks, at length when ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly (on them) ... but if it had been God's will, he could certainly have exacted retribution from them (himself), but (he lets you fight) in order to test you, some with others. But those who are slain in the way of God, he will never let their deeds be lost."

61:4 "Truly God loves those who fight in His cause in battle array, as if they were a solid cemented structure."

A simple reading of such Qur'anic passages makes it obvious how easy it is for many Muslims to feel hatred and enmity against Jews, Christians and other non-Muslims. Although, many Muslims are very fond of quoting some of the more "open-minded" and "inclusive" verses of the Qur'an, one cannot ignore the weight and impact of the above passages on a devout Muslim who wants to find and obey the will of God as found in the Qur'an. Before, we go on to other examples from prophet Muhammad himself, we need to respond to two issues that some Muslims bring up at this point.

Many have claimed that Qur'anic verses in support of fighting, were for a special historical situation concerning the beginning of Islam. They argue that since prophet Muhammad, was persecuted in Mecca for the first thirteen years of his ministry, he was justified in his military actions in the last ten years of his life in Medina and for the support of the budding Islamic movement. The problem with this reasoning is that nowhere in the Qur'an itself the above commands to fight are restricted to a special time period or against a special people group. Unlike the divine commands found in the book of Joshua in the OT, that were specific to a time, place and people group, Orthodox Muslims believe that the Qur'anic commands are universal and thus applicable for all times and places.

A second objection that one hears is that Islam is a religion of peace and war in Islam is only for self-defense. Jamal Badawi, a popular Muslim apologist, claims, "Actual armed *jihad* is permissible under two conditions alone: one is for self-defense, and the other is for fighting against oppression." (cited in Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, p. 238). Although, Badawi is quite accurate in describing the conditions of armed *jihad* in Islam, what he fails to say is that the definitions of "self-defense" and "fighting against oppression" are much broader than usually understood. Many Orthodox Muslims believe that if a nation's leaders do not acknowledge the rule of Islam, then those rulers are "oppressors" and thus a legitimate target for war (see John Kelsay, *Islam and War*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 35). Many Muslims argue that America is a cultural aggressor by exporting its Hollywood values all over the world, and thus any fight against Americans is done in self-defense (see the article by Mark Galli, "Now What?

A Christian response to religious terrorism," *Christianity Today*, Oct 22, 2001). Therefore, there is no end to how a Muslim group can define "self-defense" and "oppression" and thus find an Islamic justification for violence.

We will now turn our attention to just a few examples of some of the actions and sayings of prophet Muhammad to see if Muslims can find any legitimacy for the use of violence as witnessed in the contemporary world. We want to remind the reader that we will only use the most ancient, authoritative and original Islamic writings in support of our thesis. The earliest biography of prophet Muhammad was written by Ibn Ishaq in the second century of the Islamic era and was later edited by Ibn Hisham in the third century. This work was translated into English under the title, *The Life of Muhammad*, by A. Guillaume and published by Oxford University Press in 1955. The following accounts are some of the sayings and actions of prophet Muhammad and his close companions found in this biography.

In the constitution of Medina, whom prophet wrote when he and his followers migrated from Mecca in the year 622, we read, "A believer shall not slay a believer for the sake of an unbeliever, nor shall he aid an unbeliever against a believer ... Believers are friends one to the other to the exclusion of outsiders ... The believers must avenge the blood of one another shed in the way of God" (p. 232).

The first in the series of assassinations that the prophet ordered was an old Jewish man named Ibnu'l-Ashraf. His crime was writing poetry against Muslims. "The apostle said, 'Who will rid me of Ibnu'l-Ashraf?'" One of his followers volunteered said, "I will deal with him for you, O apostle of God, I will kill him." And the prophet responded by saying, "Do so if you can." The prophet also explicitly gave his assassins permission to lie and use trickery in order to accomplish their mission. The report goes on to describe how the prophet's followers deceived the old man out of his house in the middle of the night and jumped on him with swords and daggers and brutally murdered him. After completing their mission, the followers reported back to the prophet that they "had killed God's enemy." The author concludes this incident by writing, "Our attack upon God's enemy cast terror among the Jews, and there was no Jew in Medina who did not fear for his life" (pp. 367-368).

In the very next incident in this biography of prophet Muhammad we read, "The apostle said, 'Kill any Jew that falls into your power.'" The author then recounts the story of two brothers, the younger one of which was a Muslim. Upon hearing this command, the younger Muslim brother kills a Jewish merchant. The older brother became very critical of the action of his younger sibling. In response the younger brother says, "Had the one who ordered me to kill him ordered me to kill you I would have cut your head off." The older brother exclaimed. " 'By God, a religion which can bring you to this is marvelous!' and he became a Muslim" (p. 369).

In one of the battles, after one of prophet Muhammad's uncles was savagely killed, Muhammad became so angry that he said, "If God gives me victory over Quraysh in the future I will mutilate 30 of their men." Seeing the grief of their prophet, Muhammad's followers claimed, "By God, if God give us victory over them in the future we will mutilate them as no Arab has ever mutilated anyone." Thankfully, the prophet had a change of mind and later decided to forbid mutilation. (p. 387)

In another famous incident with Jewish people, after having already expelled two Jewish tribes from the city of Medina, the prophet orchestrated the execution of all the adult males of the last Jewish tribe of the city, and the taking of all the property and the women and children. The Muslim sources put the number of the Jewish men who were beheaded in one day anywhere between 600 to 900. (p. 464)

On another occasion, the prophet and his companions were looking for the hidden treasure of a conquered tribe. An individual was brought to Muhammad who was supposed to know where the hidden treasure was located. The prophet threatened to kill the individual if he did not tell the Muslims where the treasure was. Upon refusal to cooperate, "The apostle gave orders to al-Zubayr b. al-Awwam, 'Torture him until you extract what he has,' so he kindled a fire with flint and steel on his chest until he was nearly dead. Then the apostle delivered him to Muhammad b. Maslama and he struck off his head" (p. 515).

Upon conquering Mecca, a number of individuals were ordered to be killed by the prophet without any immunity. The crimes committed by the majority of these people were making "satirical songs" against Muhammad or having insulted him during his ministry in Mecca (p. 551). One person who was fortunate enough to be pardoned was Abdullah b. Sa'd. "The reason he [Muhammad] ordered him to be killed was that he had been a Muslim and used to write down revelation; then he apostatized and returned to Quraysh." Since Abdullah was a foster brother of a close companion of Muhammad, he was able to receive a hearing from the prophet and ask for immunity. The prophet unwillingly granted the immunity. After the pardoned person left, Muhammad said to his companions "'I kept silent so that one of you might get up and strike off his head!' One of the Ansar said, 'Then why didn't you give me a sign, O apostle of God?' He answered that a prophet does not kill by pointing'" (p. 550).

To one of his commanders whom the prophet was sending on an "expedition", he gave this advice, "Fight everyone in the way of God and kill those who disbelieve in God. Do not be deceitful with the spoil; do not be treacherous, nor mutilate, nor kill children. This is God's ordinance and the practice of his prophet among you" (p. 672).

Another assassination ordered by the prophet was regarding his uncle Abu Sufyan, the leader of the pagan opposition in Mecca. Muslim volunteers traveled to Mecca to carry out this mission. The assassination attempt failed, however. On the way back to Medina, one of the followers of the prophet encountered a one-eyed shepherd who confidently claimed that he would never accept Islam. We pick up the account from the Muslim assassin himself. As soon as the man was "asleep and snoring I got up and killed him in a more horrible way than any man has been killed. I put the end of my bow in his sound eye, then I bore down on it until I forced it out at the back of his neck ... When I got to Medina ... the apostle asked my news and when I told him what had happened he blessed me" (pp. 674-675).

The biography of the prophet follows this account with two more reports of successful assassinations ordered by the prophet. Abu Afak had "showed his disaffection with the apostle" by composing a poem. "The apostle said, 'Who will deal with this rascal for me?' whereupon Salim b. Umayr ... went forth and killed him." (p. 675). After this assassination, a woman by the name of Asma b. Marwan "displayed disaffection" and also composed a poem against the prophet. "When

the apostle heard what she had said he said, 'Who will rid me of Marwan's daughter?' Umayr ... who was with him heard him, and that very night he went to her house and killed her. In the morning he came to the apostle and told him what he had done and he [Muhammad] said, 'You have helped God and His apostle, O Umayr'" (pp. 675-676).

Once again, I think the above sample (which by no means is an exhaustive list of the violence found in the earliest biography of the prophet) is enough to provide more than an adequate justification for the killing and destruction of anyone who opposes the ideology of Islam and its demand for total submission. However, what is even more important for the shaping of Muslim attitude and behavior is not the reports of such a biography, but the collections of Muhammad's sayings and actions in the *hadith* literature. We will now look at a few examples from the *hadith*. The following are a few examples in the *hadith* collection of Bukhari, the most authoritative book in Sunni Islam, second only to the Qur'an (*Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 9 vols. translated by Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Al Nabawiya: Dar Ahya Us-Sunnah, n.d.).

"Allah's Apostle said, 'Know that Paradise is under the shades of swords.'" (vol. 4, p. 55)

"Allah's Apostle said, 'I have been ordered to fight with the people till they say, 'None has the right to be worshipped but Allah,' and whoever says, 'None has the right to be worshipped but Allah,' his life and property will be saved by me..." (vol. 4, p. 124)

"It is not fitting for a prophet that he should have prisoners of war (and free them with ransom) until he has made a great slaughter (among his enemies) in the land..." (vol. 4, p. 161)

"Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him." (vol. 9, p. 45)

"An infidel spy came to the Prophet while he was on a journey. The spy sat with the companions of the Prophet and started talking and then went away. The Prophet said (to his companions), 'Chase and kill him.' So, I killed him. The Prophet then gave him the belongings of the killed spy." (vol. 4, pp. 181-182)

"Some people from the tribe of Ukl came to the Prophet and embraced Islam. The climate of Medina did not suit them, so the Prophet ordered them to go to the (herd of milk) camels of charity and to drink their milk and urine (as a medicine). They did so, and after they had recovered from their ailment (became healthy) they turned renegades (reverted from Islam) and killed the shepherd of the camels and took the camels away. The Prophet sent (some people) in their pursuit and so they were (caught and) brought, and the Prophet ordered that their hands and legs should be cut off and that their eyes should be branded with heated pieces of iron, and that their cut hands and legs should not be cauterized, till they die." (vol. 8, pp. 519-520)

"The Prophet passed by me at a place called Al-Abwa or Waddan, and was asked whether it was permissible to attack the pagan warriors at night with the probability of exposing their women and children to danger. The Prophet replied, "They (i.e. women and children) are from them (i.e. pagans)." (vol. 4, pp. 158-159)

The above tradition, like many others, is also repeated in other collections of prophet Muhammad's sayings. In the second most authoritative *hadith* collection, *The Sahih of Muslim*, the chapter that discusses this particular saying is entitled, "Permissibility of killing women and children in the night raids, provided it is not deliberate." The author then goes on to write, "It is reported on the authority of Sa' b b. Jaththama that the Prophet of Allah (may peace be upon him), when asked about the women and children of the polytheists being killed during the night raid, said: They are from them" (vol. 3, pp. 946-947, *Sahih Muslim*, translated by Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, 4 vols.)

We will end this discussion with two more traditions from another collection, *Sunan Abu Dawud*. Under a chapter entitled, "Excellence of killing an infidel" we read the following saying. "Abu Harairah reported the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) as saying: An infidel and the one who killed him will never be brought together in Hell." The Muslim translator of this work adds the following footnote to this tradition, "This means that a person who kills an infidel while fighting in Allah's path (i.e. *jihad*) will have his sins remitted and forgiven, and will, therefore, go to Paradise. The infidel will inevitably go to Hell. Thus the man who killed an infidel will not be brought together in Hell with him" (vol. 2, p. 690 from *Sunan Abu Dawud*, translated by Ahmad Hasan, 3 vols., New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1990).

Another chapter in this collection is entitled, "Punishment of a man who abuses the Prophet (may peace be upon him)." The author recounts the story of a Muslim man who killed his slave and concubine by whom he had two children. Since she "disparaged" the Prophet, the slave owner, "took the dagger, put it on her belly and pressed it till [he] killed her." Upon hearing the reason for this murder, the prophet said, "Oh, be witness, no retaliation is payable for her blood" (ibid. vol. 3, pp. 1214-1215). The next incident in the above chapter is reported by Ali. "A Jewess used to abuse the Prophet (may peace be upon him) and disparage him. A man strangled her till she died. The Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) declared that no recompense was payable for her blood" (p. 1215) Once again, the translator provides us with the following explanatory notes. "It is unanimously agreed that if a Muslim abuses or insults the Prophet (may peace be upon him) he should be killed ... even if a Jew or any non-Muslim abuses the Prophet (may peace be upon him) he will be killed ... The punishment for abusing or opposing the Prophet (may peace be upon him) was death" (p. 1215).

Violence in Islam, whether in the form of terrorism, or the persecution of Christians and other minorities in the Muslim world, or capital punishment for an individual who turns away from Islam or death threats on Salman Rushdie for allegedly insulting prophet Muhammad, are not simply some isolated incidents or aberrations from the true and peaceful religion of Islam. Such violence in fact goes to the very roots of Islam as found in the Qur'an and the actions and teachings of the prophet of Islam himself. Osama bin Laden, quoted some of the very same Qur'anic and *hadith* passages that we have documented here in order to provide religious justification of his actions (see the transcript of his video tape in the *New York Times*, Fri, Dec. 14, 2001, B4).

We would like to conclude this section by referring to a program produced by Frontline and shown on PBS around the country, entitled "The Saudi Time Bomb." At one point in this program we were told about the state sponsored religious education in Saudi Arabia. According to Frontline, "approximately 35% of school studies is devoted to compulsory Saudi religious education." One of these textbooks published in 2000, was a collection of prophet Muhammad's sayings, which was

used by middle school students in Saudi Arabia. One lesson is entitled, "The Victory of Muslims Over Jews." According to a tradition from prophet Muhammad, "The last hour won't come before the Muslims would fight the Jews and the Muslims will kill them so Jews would hide behind rocks and trees. Then the rocks and trees would call: oh, Muslim, oh, servant of God! There is a Jew, behind me, come and kill him." Like a good textbook, the teachings of this saying are summarized in several prepositional statements such as:

- It's fate decided by Allah that the Muslims and Jews will fight till the end of the world.
- This Hadith predicts for the Muslims God's victory over the Jews.
- Jews and Christians are the enemies of believers. They will never approve of the Muslims, beware of them.

(Source: [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/etc/textbooks.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/etc/textbooks.html))

Ideas have consequences. It has also become very clear for our world once again that violent ideas have violent consequences. We are not engaging in old Christian-Muslim polemics when we point out the prevalence of violence throughout the foundations and thus subsequent history of Islam. We are only exposing the teachings in the most original and authoritative sources of Islam. We believe that it is essential for people of good will around the world to know that underneath all the political, social and cultural causes for the rise of violence among Muslims, there is a religious foundation for violence deeply embedded within the very worldview of Islam. The world needs to take the challenge of Islam more seriously than any other time in the past.

---

[Islam & Terrorism](#)

[Answering Islam](#) Home Page