

**Say: "I believe in whatever revelation Allah has bestowed from on high; And I am bidden to bring about equity in your mutual views ... . Let there be no contention between us and you..." (Q 42:15)**

For a centuries old religious text, this attitude of tolerance is remarkable. But events like the September 11 attacks have led to an increase in Islamophobia and a hostile approach to the Quran which leads people to read it with the intent of proving to themselves and others that Islam is a violent religion. Not only is this hostile approach simplistically fulfilling, it leads to incorrect results.

Often, we see verses quoted partially in order to portray the Quran as preaching violence. Not only is reading the entire passage critical to understanding a verse, reading the entire Quran is also crucial because all Quranic verses interact with each other.

In addition, historical context is crucial too. Many of the last 23 years of Muhammad's life were spent resisting persecution and torture, to protect himself and his followers. Muhammad did fight to defend himself and the thousands of people under his protection. Many verses sanctioning warfare and killing were revealed in the context of either an ongoing battle when the other side had begun the hostilities, cases of self defense, or when the other side had broken treaties. All such "fighting" verses must be interpreted in the context of a struggle against oppression and persecution.

Of the approximately 6236 verses of the Quran, only 59 mention fighting or warfare in any context. Of these 59 verses, at least 10 contain injunctions not to fight. A few more mention fighting only in passing and in the context of the earlier prophets. That leaves only 47 that urge warfare. Far more of its verses (114) urge peace.

**(From the book "The Muslim Next Door" by Sumbul Ali-Karamali)**

### ***Jihad* and Its Various Connotations**

Linguistically *jihad* means "struggle", "striving" or "exertion", though it is commonly and incorrectly translated as "holy war" (a term originating in the Western tradition in the context of intra-Christian conflict); in Arabic "holy war" would be equivalent to the term *al-harb al-muqaddas*, which does not exist in classical Arabic. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, *jihad* means any struggle in the way of God, that is, in order to obey His commands or accomplish His Will, which includes but is not limited to the just use of force.

Even though in the Quran and hadith, *jihad* is an idea comprising both the spiritual and material, the inward and outward domains (often referred to as the "Greater Jihad" and the "Lesser Jihad," respectively), in the works of Islamic Law, the word *jihad* as a technical term came to be understood to as a reference to the taking up of arms "in the way of God," though governed by strict rules that have counterparts in the western concept of "just war". That is to say there is a distinction to be made between the word *jihad* as it is used in the Quran and the same term in the later legal tradition, much the same way the word *fiqh* and its cognates in the Quran refer to "understanding" in a general sense, but as a technical term came to refer later to law and jurisprudence.

### **When is the Use of Force Justified for Muslims**

- When *they have been wronged and expelled from their homes* (22:39 - 40)
- When they have been persecuted and threatened to renounce their religion (2:217)
- Defending other Muslims who are unable to defend themselves. (4:75 )

Under these conditions, they are commanded to fight and even kill their enemies, and yet *if they desist, then there is no enmity save against the wrongdoers* (2:193) and *what is past will be forgiven them* (8:38).

The moral landscape of the Quran is unambiguously against religious persecution and military aggression and in favor of justice and forgiveness and restraint, and one cannot consider the rules and justifications for the use of force without consideration of the Quran's general view of other religions and its overall social teachings.

### **Coercion in Matters of Religion**

Many verses in the Quran attest to the free practice of religion and command to preach peacefully and without coercion. (Q 42:48; Q2:256) But certain hadiths seem to contradict this, like the one where Prophet Muhammad says, *"I have been commanded to fight the people until they bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is God's messenger..."* For the majority of traditional scholars, the maximum possible scope for "the people" in this hadith is limited strictly to the pagan Arabs who had been his unrelenting enemies and persecutors. Also, the word *qatala* in Arabic implies that one is in mutual contention with someone, not in a mode of aggression.

Similarly, the so-called Sword Verse, Q 9:5 is interpreted by some to allow forced conversions, this in spite of the fact that Q 9:6 commands Muslims to preach the truth to asylum seekers and to let them go safely (without any pre-condition that they repent and accept Islam). This interpretation is achieved by suggesting that 9:6 was abrogated by 9:5. The invocation of "abrogation" as it concerns passages that relate to the use of force is a persistent issue in Quranic commentary.

### **Treaties and Treaty People**

From the time he took political power in Madinah until his death, the Prophet entered into treaties with several tribes on the Arabian Peninsula. Among the key verses dealing with treaties are Q 8:56-61 and Q 9:7-16 (*If they remain true to you, remain true to them. Truly God loves the reverent.*) The Quran doesn't allow Muslims to wage war on those who pose no threat at all. (Q 4:90; 8:61)

In Islamic Law, the People of the Book (usually Jews and Christians, but in practice also Zoroastrians, Hindus, and others) who live under the political rule of Muslims are called *ahl al-dhimmah*, literally "people of treaty". In this arrangement, they live under the laws and within the framework provided by the Islamic State, but with complete autonomy with regard to their religious and cultural matters. The protected people are subjected to a tax specific to them, most commonly known as *jizyah*. The verse that institutes *jizyah* is Q 9:29 : *"Fight ...till they pay*

*the jizyah with a willing hand, being humbled.*” There are various interpretations brought to the phrase “humbled”. In Islamic history, some rulers have enforced a kind of humiliation to the paying of the *jizyah*, but in doing so, they have generally gone against the most established Islamic precedent and legal opinion. Neither the Prophet nor the early Caliphs humiliated dhimmis during the payment of the *jizyah*; sometimes they allowed it to be called “charity” and always required that it be collected with gentleness.

### **The Conduct of War and the Limits of Conquest**

*“Do not transgress. Truly God loves not the transgressors.”* Q 2:190

The Quran always frames the use of force in terms of moral principles. A straightforward argument could be made in support of fighting to conquer Makkah, the town from which Muslims had been expelled, but did the early Muslim community have the moral authority to conquer the remainder of Arabia? Byzantium? Persia?

The decades after the death of the Prophet was a tumultuous time, and on questions related to war and politics, it is difficult to speak of a consensus in the Muslim community. However, there was an explicit sense among at least some in the early community that, when they fought, they were fighting not for hegemony and conquest for their own sake or to make the world’s population Muslim, but for the survival of the religion itself.

Does Islamic Law treat the entire world as hostile until conquered? The often invoked delineation between the “Abode of Islam” and the “Abode of War”, a terminology not found in the Quran or hadith, is a relic of a time when empires could go to war at any time in the absence of a treaty. This is precisely what “Abode of War” meant: an area that had not signed a treaty and hence was a potential aggressor. Hence, it was not a simple bifurcation, since there was also the “Abode of Treaty” and the “Abode of Safety”, referring to lands with whom a treaty or pact existed, and other designations to describe the political status of a territory.

**(From the Study Quran Essay, “Conquest and Conversion, War and Peace in the Quran” by Caner K. Dagli)**

Further reading: [“The Use of Force under Islamic Law”](#) by Niaz A. Shah

### **Reflections**

Discuss the rules in the conduct of war in light of Quranic principles and a general understanding of Islamic law.

Discuss Q 9:5 - 6. How would you interpret it without resorting to “abrogation”?

Discuss the current conflicts and its moral bearings in light of the Quran.